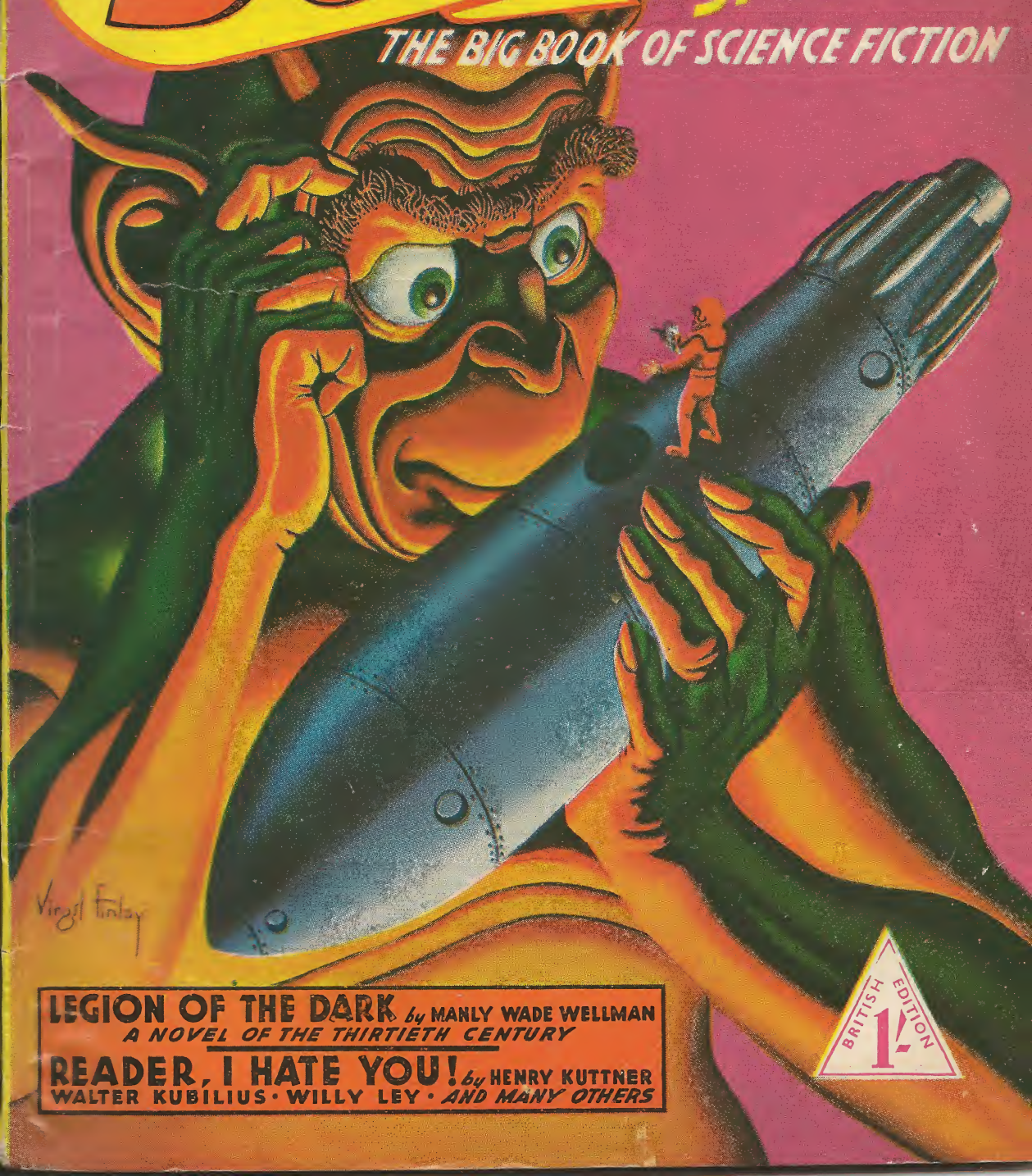


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A NOVEL OF THE THIRTIETH CENTURY

READER, I HATE YOU! *by* HENRY KUTTNER
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No. 8

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THE BEST IN SCIENCE FICTION

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LEGION OF THE DARK

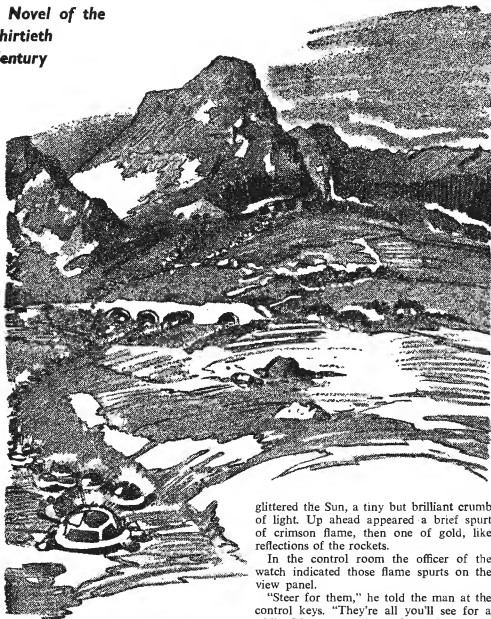
By MANLY WADE WELLMAN



★ Beyond hope, beyond fear, they came to Inner-World's last outpost—where the Legion of the Dark kept dreadful vigil against a foe whose touch meant death! ★

**A Novel of the
Thirtieth
Century**

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CHAPTER I

OUTPOST OF NOWHERE

FIRE streaked the velvet of space, fire from a rosette of rocket nozzles, to urge along the great, unwieldy oval that was the biggest and longest-range ship ever made by the Martio-Terrestrial League. Far astern

glittered the Sun, a tiny but brilliant crumb of light. Up ahead appeared a brief spurt of crimson flame, then one of gold, like reflections of the rockets.

In the control room the officer of the watch indicated those flame spurts on the view panel.

"Steer for them," he told the man at the control keys. "They're all you'll see for a while. Then a steadier, softer light pattern will cue us into the port. Mind you don't miss that or we'll crash where people don't like to think about crashing."

The controlman fingered his keyboard like a skilful pianist, then looked at the view panel.

"Can't we even get a look at the shape of Stygia?" he asked. "Just turn the dials, sir, get a sharper view—"

"Stygia's black," snapped the officer.

"Why else do they call her Stygia? Haven't you read your cosmography, even if this is your first trip? If it wasn't for the volcanoes we might never have discovered Stygia."

"No loss," commented the controlman. He had been flying through space for nearly a year and a half, the last six months of it in the dark emptiness beyond Pluto, and he did not like it.

His superior laughed shortly and harshly, turned to the rear panel-way.

"There has to be some limit to the Solar System," he reminded, "and on that limit the League thinks it has to have a post, a garrison—and transport facilities. Cheer up! If it wasn't Stygia it might be a planet farther out. Who knows? There may even be one farther out, still undiscovered." He left then, going into the aft compartment.

There sat his passengers, hard-eyed, bearded, sardonic. A dozen of the twenty had been at the age-old game of dice, the others lounging silently as spectators, but all looked up and waited for the officer's words.

"We're commencing to brake off," he announced. "That means pressure forward. Brace yourselves."

One man groaned. "Hours of that now."

"Days of it," corrected the officer. "Look here, we've done nearly six billion miles in eighteen months. Figure it out yourselves—around a hundred and fifteen miles a second, top speed. It'll take ten days to slow down to landing speed. I thought you'd be glad to know the voyage is fagging out."

The man who had groaned now snorted. "Sure the voyage is nearly over. And what's our port? Stygia—the Legion of the Dark, the toughest and most useless government post in the System! Who'd take it except those who can't refuse it, jailbirds and worse?" He got up from where he knelt among the dicers. He was big and rawboned, and his gray-shot brown beard hung to the end of his breastbone. "Thanks for telling us about braking off, mister. But don't congratulate us on where we're going to land. We know how sweet a spot that is, don't we, men?"

There was a chorus of yells and curses to support the speaker. He and his comrades were destined for the Legion of the Dark.

They were the offscourings and misfits and criminals from the Inner Planets, rounded up and organized for duty upon Stygia, the habitable planet beyond Pluto which must be subjugated to fulfil the

conquering destiny of Inner-World civilization.

"When you're in the Legion you'll learn respect for your superiors," said the officer. Brown-beard grinned without mirth.

"I'm not in yet. So why respect you?" He took a step nearer. "Why respect you?" he repeated.

The officer flinched back, despite himself, and one or two watchers laughed.

At that moment another hairy recruit slid out of the group of onlookers and up to the pair. He was big and heavily-built, seemingly too large to be as quiet and swift and smooth in his movements.

"No trouble," he bade softly, and put his hand on the malcontent's angular shoulder.

He appeared to exert no pressure at all, yet Brown-beard's whole body stiffened and vibrated. The ghost of a whimper came from hairy lips. Then: "Don't—I didn't mean—"

"All right." The big hand relaxed and moved from the shoulder. Crestfallen and quiet, Brown-beard slunk away.

The officer, who had watched with a certain critical interest, spoke again: "Suit yourselves about how you feel. I didn't enlist you for the Legion of the Dark, and I'm really sorry for you. All I came here for was to inform you of the brake-off. Get set for it."

HE turned on his heel, sensing a few sullen glares, but no other hostility. As he moved toward the door of the control room he passed near the big man who had sided with him.

"Come here," he said. He looked at the fellow's stalwart limbs, his black beard of youth, his eyes bright and pained and old-seeming. The fellow wore elascoid overalls like the others, but they were unusually clean and neat.

"Why did you help me?" he asked.

The big man made a deprecatory gesture. "Because I wanted no trouble. I joined the Legion very gratefully. If there was a scene or violence, the whole bunch of us might have been punished."

The officer nodded. "You're master of a very useful science, aren't you—I mean, the way you handled that customer?"

"Handled him?" repeated the giant in his soft voice.

"Just a touch of a nerve. It happens," said the officer, "that once or twice I've seen exhibitions of nerve-wrestling. Only they aren't to be seen often—because the only

men who know how to do it are high—very high—officials in the Martio-Terrestrial League."

"You're a high official and know the science?" That was almost a challenge.

The officer shook his head. "No, I said I'd only seen it done. Well, thanks again."

He moved to go, but the big man spoke quick. "I have a favor to ask, sir."

"Favor?" echoed the officer. "What?"

"Message home. Message back to Earth."

The officer shook his head. "That's not regulation. No scrap of writing can be taken from Stygia without the knowledge and approval of the commandant."

"This can be spoken. And you'll be paid well for taking it. You'll land in St. Louis, the World capital? Find a—a lady named Naomi Tennant."

"Naomi Tennant. I've heard that name."

"Yes," nodded the big recruit. "Daughter of Spaceways' chief engineer. Tell her that you saw me and that I was saying nothing."

The officer turned the words in his mind. "Whom shall I say I saw?"

The bearded face smiled slightly. "That means you'll carry the message? I give no name, sir. Only tell what I looked like, that I was a recruit of the Legion. Nothing more."

"Mmm. I'll see."

The officer walked back to the control room. The forward rockets were blooming, and pressure came from the bow of the craft, so that he braced himself against it.

"Funny types among those rookies," he commented to the man at the controls, who nodded in agreement.

"Isn't the Legion of the Dark made up of funny types, sir? I hope, for their own sakes, they stay funny. There's precious little to laugh at where they're going."

SLOWLY, carefully, the ship descended on a vast, gray disc in the gloom, like a single small beam set grudgingly on a large round plate. Even so far from the sun, there was light here—dim, soft dusk. The door opened, and a harsh, guttural voice spoke:

"Recruits! Turn out immediately!"

They poured out through the lock-panel, twenty-six men, all Terrestrial and all rough-looking.

"Stand in a line!" bade the commanding voice. "Quickly! Learn to obey!"

The owner of the voice made a dull glimmer in the twilight. He wore a metalized

uniform of high-colored tunic, breeches, and boots, and stood erect like a Terrestrial. But even in a darker spot he would be recognizable as a Martian.

His shapeless bladder-body was corseted into something like a firm torso, his two lower tentacles braced and shaped to act as legs. His head, tufted with petal-like tags of tissue that made him look like a walking dandelion, was cocked back arrogantly. In the breathing hole of that head was lodged an artificial larynx, with which he achieved spoken words. His upper tentacles, clad in sleeves and set akimbo like arms, bore the ancient triple chevron of a sergeant.

The newcomers lined up obediently. The air of this new world was heavy and still, and each man felt oppressed and leaden by more gravity than he had known at home. The Martian sergeant strutted along the front of the formation, with a whispering clink of brace-joints.

"Rrrr . . . yes. A typical group from the gutters of the Inner Planets! Unkempt, sullen, stupid!" The artificial voice slurred and quivered. "The whole of you would not make a smut on the uniform of a true Legionary!"

"I don't like that," growled the gaunt Brown-beard who had voiced complaints aboard the ship.

The sergeant paused in front of him. "Yourr name?"

"Scoban. Door Scoban."

The petalled head wagged negation. "No. Yourr name iss Private Scoban! Ssay it."

The brown beard quivered angrily. "Private Scoban, sir."

"Not sirr to a sserrgeant—only obedient action and silence."

The Martian whistled in his larynx, and two more men in metallized fabric came smartly up behind him.

"Arrest Prvate Scoban!"

The men marched Brown-beard away, and the sergeant continued to the others: "You arre Legionaries now. Be warned—punishment befalls those who whine orr question or arre tardy in obeying orrers. We arre prroud to be disciplinned soldierrss, with the harrrdesst service of all the Sysstem to perfform. Any otherr complaints?"

There were none.

The sergeant rasped an order: "Right face! Forrwarrr march! Follow me!"

The recruits obediently trailed after him, dragging their feet like iron shackles after his briskly tramping boot heels. They could

see, with eyes growing accustomed to the dimness, that the gray disc on which they stood was a great metal landing stage of some sort, with here and there little kiosks leading to stages below. Around the edge of the round expanse showed only dark—sooty, mysterious dark. One or two men thought they heard noises somewhere out beyond.

The Martian led them to one of the kiosks and down a flight of stairs, then along a corridor to a square chamber like a school room.

"Sit," he ordered, and they sat on hard benches, their eyes fixed on the man at the desk before them.

HE was of middle-age, no more than average height, and as slender as a boy. His pale hair was cropped close above a pale face with lean jaw and penetrating eyes. On his uniform tunic were golden galleons of rank.

He waited for the recruits to subside, then spoke. "I am your commanding officer. My name is Barlund, and my rank is that of colonel. As directed by the regulations of the service in which I am included, I shall speak briefly of what your duties and expectations may be.

"This, the planet Stygia, is the outermost known world of the Solar System. It is six billion miles from the central sun, and has been certified as habitable. Because of its habitability, the government of the Martio-Terrestrial League, which took possession here seven years ago, is determined to explore, estimate, and develop all possible resources and characteristics.

"Stygia is nineteen thousand miles in diameter, with a gravitational pull approximately twice that of Earth. Central fires, which break out in volcanoes, keep the surface warm. Various forms of life, approximating both animal and vegetable, are to be found here. To learn more about these forms of life is our task."

He paused and studied his audience. When he spoke again it was with soldierly harshness.

"This garrison of the Martio-Terrestrial League, manned by the Legion of the Dark, is located upon the highest peak of all Stygia, a dome-shaped mountain some thirty-six thousand feet above Stygia's sea level. Air is more breathable here, and light more adequate. Also, the inhabitants of Stygia find

it harder to attack us here, and defenses have been perfected to give us some safety.

"Beyond this, your instructors will guide you. Sergeant Kzak, you may—" Colonel Barlund broke off and looked at a note on his desk. "Wait. Is there a recruit by the name of Farr?"

"Here, sir." It was the big man who had asked a favor of the watch officer aboard the ship.

"Remain. The rest of you accompany Sergeant Kzak."

The Martian gave orders and led his charges away. Colonel Barlund was left alone, facing the huge recruit who had answered to the name of Farr.

"WHY do you lie?" demanded the colonel at once.

The man called Farr widened his wise-looking eyes a trifle.

"Your name isn't Farr. You're from high up, and you've no business in this kind of mess. Admit that."

All this was said without heat. Farr narrowed his eyes again.

"I've enlisted as Farr, William Farr. I came to be a soldier in the Legion of the Dark. You need men, I think, sir."

"All of which doesn't answer my charge."

Colonel Barlund looked at his paper again. "Private Farr—since you stick to that—we don't like mysteries here. The planet of Stygia is mystery enough, without men like you adding to it. Ordinarily I'd let a man give a false name if he pleased—we're far out of range of census bureaus and birth certificates and such. But you're not ordinary. You were important back home. Important men don't lose themselves in the Legion of the Dark."

"I'm sorry, sir," Farr really looked it. "I have nothing to say."

"I wonder if you'll stick to that after you've read this."

The colonel held out the paper. Farr took it and read, frowning.

Commandant,
Garrison of Stygia:

A recruit who uses the name of William Farr is being sent to you by the ship on which this message is being mailed. He is more than he seems to be. He has left an important station among the Inner Worlds, through no fault of his own, and can be of great aid to his former associates. Please take what action you find convenient to return him.

Naomi Tennant,
Board of Directors,
Spaceways, Inc.

Farr clicked his tongue absently, and muttered something like: "Must she?"

He handed the paper back. "Not much for you to work on, eh, sir?" he inquired, as if speaking to an equal, and, as to an equal, the colonel dolefully nodded.

"If you won't help further, go and join the others," he said. "But Naomi Tennant is important back home, almost as important as her father, and you should be willing to oblige her."

"Perhaps I've already done so," Farr rose and saluted. "I have your permission to go?"

He hurried, striving hard against the double gravity of Stygia, to overtake the recruits led by Sergeant Kzak.

The Martian, slurring orders, took them to a supply depot, where a variety of equipment was served out. First, a metallized uniform, which bore within its fabric the network of power-threads that cut the gravity pull in half and made active life possible; boots and belts, the latter furnished with sheaths and pouches for a variety of instruments; weapons—MS-ray throwers, electro-automatic rifles and ammunition carriers; bedding, toilet articles, and many other items.

"Sstrip!" commanded the slurring voice of Kzak. "Sstrip—and sshape. Do not put the honored uniform of the Legion upon bodices that are not clean and worthy!"

At his insistence beards were sheared and lathered, then scraped away. One or two men glanced at William Farr as he came from behind his hairy mask.

"Look, big one, haven't I seen you before?" hailed one.

"Before what?" quibbled Farr with a grin.

"Were you in teleradio shows?"

"I've never been anywhere," Farr finished throwing off his overall. He got into the shining tunic and breeches and boots of the Legion, and made an upstanding figure in them. Kzak strolled toward him.

"You sshape up well. Have you had prvious military experience? If so, you might get promotion."

"Nothing of that sort," replied Farr. "I'm only—"

A strident buzzing suddenly drowned out the rest of his words.

The recruits gaped, wonderingly. Only Kzak and the three supply-room attendants moved to action of an intelligent sort.

"Alarrrm! To posstss!" bawled the Martian, and hurried out. The attendants, three

froglike Venusians and a wiry little Terrestrial, followed.

Left alone, the recruits chattered and inquired, with none to answer their mystified questions—save the man who had just disclaimed any military knowledge.

"Attention, you men!" suddenly thundered William Farr, and all voices hushed, all eyes turned to him.

"That buzzer was the signal of a serious emergency," Farr was saying. "Attack of some kind from below, I judge. . . . Well, what are you waiting for? Get into those uniforms; they'll cut the gravity so that you can move. Any of you know how to use ray-throwers and automatics? All right, grab the weapons. Form up in columns of twos!"

"Who made you an officer?" demanded the man nearest him, glaring with truculent eyes.

"Do as you're told," bade Farr, but the other shook his head. He was the angular malcontent Scoban, who had been arrested, reprimanded, and restored to duty.

"We're raw recruits. If you push us into some kind of fight it'll be fatal! I don't recognize your right to give orders."

Farr sighed, as if in doleful acceptance of an unpleasant duty, and stepped across to Scoban. As once before, he put out a quick, knowing hand. Scoban tried to dodge, but too late. Farr's hand hooked behind Scoban's scruff; Farr's other thumb prodded scientifically at Scoban's solar plexus. The man collapsed limply, almost restfully, as if under anesthetic. Farr caught him as he fell and tumbled him into a corner.

"Column of twos," he commanded the others again, and they fell in quickly, carrying their weapons with various degrees of knowingness. "Follow me."

HE led them forth into a corridor they had not known. He paused for only a moment. His eyes caught a glimmer of blue and yellow lights up ahead.

"Guardhouse," he said, under his breath, and strode toward it, his followers obediently keeping at his heels.

The lights proved to be a signal cluster above a barred door. Farr pointed a pistol-form MS-ray thrower at the lock, and with a single pencil-thin spurt of cruel white light slapped the door open. He looked inside.

"Who's there?" he demanded. "Senior man, step out."

A chunky prisoner came into view. His

sleeves showed where a sergeant's stripes had been removed.

"I was busted down from—" he began.

"Come along," cut in Farr. "Know what that signal means?"

"Attack on all hands," said the ex-sergeant.

"Lead us to the nearest point of action," Farr directed, and the prisoner obediently tramped away up the corridor.

Farr, letting his new subordinate lead, fell back to the flank of his double column.

"You men who know guns and rays instruct those who don't," he crisped out. "Any other prisoners coming from the guardhouse? Four, I see. All right, men. You're experienced soldiers. I'm making you my lieutenants. Divide these rookies among you into four squads. The sergeant commands under me."

The ex-sergeant guided the group to a great lift. At Farr's nod all boarded, and the sergeant touched a button. They began to descend with increasing speed. Suddenly the car halted. A new corridor opened before them. At its end rose a strange, confused medley of sound—hissing, buzzing, yelping, the murmur of voices.

"Wh-what's that?" quavered a young recruit, his hands shakily balancing weapons he hardly knew how to use.

Farr smiled upon him in almost fatherly fashion. "That," he replied, "is a battle. And it's very, very close indeed—perhaps dangerously close. You acting-lieutenants, form the men for defense firing. Follow me."

ON an upper crag of the fortified mountain was a tiny metal cupola from which Colonel Barlund watched, as well as the gloom would let him, the assault on his position. He could make out the great curved slope beneath him, the ramparted mouths of caves where his troops were stationed, the pale, brief flashes of gunfire and ray action, the glowing trajectories of roving bombs from radio-propulsion nozzles. Too, he could make out ugly, livid glow-shapes beneath—a vast field of rotten-seeming radiance, soft and quivering, like a phosphorescent bed of ooze in an ocean depth.

"There they are," he groaned, "more of 'em than anyone ever saw before—must be a kind of alliance of all types against us."

"It's the coming of the ship," suggested a slender captain behind him. "They almost always made a token attack when a ship came, particularly if they wanted to grab it.

No attack the last three landings; they were gathering strength for this one. Hitting all sides at once."

"And there aren't enough of us to turn them back all around the defense," groaned another subordinate.

"Never mind swan songs until it's time to sing," Barlund snubbed him. He turned to a microphone. "Attention, all defense positions! Concentrate fire on thickest glow-fields that indicate largest bodies of enemy. . . Reserve forces, bring up additional supplies of ammunition—"

A courier scampered in breathlessly. "Colonel Barlund, sir, there's been a break at the guardhouse! Door rayed open; every prisoner gone!"

"See to that emergency," Barlund growled at the officer who had mourned inadequacy of defense personnel. His eyes were fixed on a segment of the fortifications below, where no evidence of fire could be seen. He cursed feelingly.

"Why aren't they defending there?" he demanded of the universe at large. "Look, not a shot, not a ray, not a bomb! And the attack is concentrating there. Two big entries to our position could be rushed! Once the enemy gets in—"

In the gloomy depths below showed a great mass of softly glowing light that seemed to crawl like sentient lava up the slope toward the undefended position. Barlund set his teeth, tried to think of an intelligent order to give—without success. Then . . .

The two silent cave-mouths burst into live flame.

A sustained, smashing salvo of electro-automatic pellets sprayed downward, point-blank, at the advancing stream of menace. Bombs, too, sprang into the thick of the target. Rays bloomed into being and played with deadly purpose. Caught fair and unwarned, the advancing mass seemed to explode and break up, like mercury before a prodding finger. Within seconds it was flowing downhill again—what was left of it.

Barlund cursed again, but with exultant relief.

"That's success!" he bawled. "Look, the whole attack's going to slack off. Man, what slaughter we must have pulled off! Who was in command there, Renald? Get him on the speaking system!"

A subordinate hurried to obey, and Barlund grabbed the microphone.

"Captain Renald? Colonel Barlund speaking. Congratulations—"

"Thanks, but it wasn't my doing, sir," came the voice of Captain Renald. "Your man, Farr, with the recruits, took over as you told him, and—"

"Farr took over as I told him?" broke in Barlund. "I told him nothing!"

"But he said you'd sent him with special orders to decoy a strong force of the enemy almost to our defenses. And it worked splendidly, sir!"

Barlund cursed yet again. "Captain Renald, take over there again. Tell your command to hold fire, but stand ready for any other indication of danger. And tell two men to arrest that troublemaker, Farr, and bring him to me."

CHAPTER II

DEATH PATROL

A GAIN, in the office of the commandant, Colonel Barlund and Private William Farr faced each other. This time they were not alone. Two armed soldiers of the Legion guarded Farr, and to one side, with writing materials, sat Sergeant Kzak as recorder.

"Private Farr," said the colonel, "I have an official report that you led the recruits into battle, assuming command of a post from Captain Renald, and giving commands that led to resistance of the enemy."

"You make it sound like an accusation, sir," responded Farr.

"It is three accusations. You have violated three general orders that govern this post—the first in bringing danger to men not properly trained; the second in falsely using my supposed authority to your own ends; the third in assuming command when you were not qualified or commissioned to do so."

Farr bowed, urbanely and almost grandly. "I did all three. It seemed that the position was in grave danger. I saw a chance to save it, and did so."

"You did?" said Colonel Barlund. "How?"

"The men I had organized were not soldiers nor marksmen. Yet I felt that they were determined, and might do something if they got a chance to send point-blank volleys. Then, acting as you say I did, I superseded the officer in command and held

all fire until I had drawn a great attacking force forward—"

"How did you manage that?" the colonel asked.

Farr smiled wispily. "I climbed out of the defenses and down the slope. The air was thick, and I could not see far into the dark. But I saw the attackers—stubby, many-legged, phosphorescent. And they saw me, or sensed me. I retreated, and they followed me right into the trap."

"A fourth violation," summed up the commandant. "No member of this garrison shall venture out of the defenses except on order."

"I caused a retreat of the enemy," reminded Farr.

The pale face of Barlund grew paler still. "Stop that shadow-boxing!" he snarled. "You're a prisoner, not an instructor! You had a chance, not more than a few hours ago, to tell the truth about yourself. Now, since you're setting yourself up as a romantic hero—" He broke off for a moment, then said, "Sergeant Kzak!"

"Ssir!"

"Patrol tonight. In fact, as soon as you can equip a reconnaissance party."

"Yess, ssir. I will take charge?"

"Of course. And this man, Private Farr, goes with you—as *point*."

"Yess, ssir," Kzak rose. "Come with me, Farr."

The prisoner's smile was positively sunny.

ON the lower surfaces of Stygia, dark and quiet and oppressive as a sea bottom, an army lay encamped in the eternal siege of the Legion's mountain fortress.

Seldom had the explorers from sunward ever seen the Stygians clearly; those who did see them were still more seldom apt to live and tell of the sight. The natives of the dark, warm world were designed by nature for life in an environment characterized by strong gravitational pull, limited light, high air pressure. They were built heavy and low to the ground, on many appendages which served for legs—some had six, some had eight. The body thus supported on stumpy limbs was dome-shaped and massive, like a turtle's back. Its outer rind, tougher than leather, emitted a glow. In most specimens this phosphorescence was a sickly white, like the luster of pearls in a shadowed pool. Others gave off blue, pink, or prismatic tinges. These of the coloured lights were generally bigger and more forthright of movement, as befitted leaders of a people.

The Stygians sprouted tentacles all around the lower edge of their dome-bodies, tentacles as cunning and pliable as fingers, able to stretch and twine and handle. These tentacles plied the various strange weapons devised by Stygian science, did work and manufacture, and also achieved the vibrational sounds that constituted the articulate language of the race.

"How many dead?" One of the pink-lighted chiefs now asked a council of his fellows behind the lines.

"Very many," contributed another, who had received a report from the recent disastrous battle. "Hundreds, we think. They died almost at the moment of reaching that doorway to the fortress of the Sky-Devils."

"And of the bodies?"

"A few were saved."

"I don't like that!" broke in a strident vibration from the senior commander, a dome fully ten feet across and seven high, more than half again the size of his largest associate. "The explosions and fires of the Sky-Devil weapons not only wipe out our best and bravest, but also the armor and equipment with which we fit them for attack in those upper thin reaches of atmosphere. Salvage what can be salvaged. Fit out a new shock force—for we are going to attack again."

"Again? But the vessel of the Sky-Devils has departed into the Upper Mysteries." That was the pink-glowing chief, who also had reports. "Our observers watched it depart just after the repulsing of our attack."

"No matter. Another has come."

"So soon?" came the incredulous vibration of several.

"Yes, almost immediately after the departure of the first. And—" the biggest commander glowed more brightly in a greenish tinge, as if to display triumph foreordained—"this time we may seize that vessel."

There was much excitement all around. All Stygians had hoped from the beginning of the century-long war with invading Sky-Devils to take one of the strange flying machines that apparently brought them from afar. Such a device, captured and investigated, might well answer many riddles—whence the Sky-Devils came; what they wanted on this world which did not want them; how they lived in so rarefied an atmosphere; how best to conquer and destroy them.

"Therefore," finished the chief of the chiefs, "bring forth all the armor, the

pressure-bestowers, the weapons of assault. We shall hold nothing back to win straight to the heart of the Sky-Devil defenses. Our world and people shall be free by this time tomorrow."

SIX Legionaries, in a small supply room, got into special equipment. The commander of the party, Sergeant Kzak, gave directions

"Do not disdain this armor," he urged as one or two grimaced over swaddlings of fabric and metal mountings similar to space-overalls. "It will fence off some of the pressure in the lower altitudes."

Two of the six were Venusians, frog-like and goggling, with booming voices that Kzak did not like.

"The pressure won't be worse than at home on Venus," one protested. "Why must we go armored?"

"There are worse things than the atmosphere down there," replied Kzak cryptically. "Do as you are told. Full equipment."

Private William Farr had had difficulty finding armor to fit his mighty body. He poised a spherical helmet of glassite between big gloved hands and grinned above it at Kzak.

"I understand that we know very little about the lower surfaces of Stygia," he said. "Tunnelling down has failed, because the mineral construction of this hill is so tough and hard. And low-swooping aircraft with searchlights get blasted to bits by the inhabitants. Well, then why not—"

"Silence!" bawled Kzak, almost as loud as a Venusian. "Are you not aware of your place in this patrol?"

"Oh, perfectly. I'm to be killed."

The others—the Venusians, the two additional Terrestrial soldiers, and Kzak—all fell silent, as if embarrassed by the answer.

Farr went on, quite genially, "I'm designated as the point, the leading individual in the patrol. I'll be the closest and first to danger. From what I know about such attempts as the present one, and from what I hear about Stygia, the chance of a reconnaissance patrol returning is no more than fair. The position of point man is dangerous even to a seasoned veteran of such patrols. It stands to the reason of such persons as Colonel Barlund, and of yourself, Sergeant Kzak, that my own chance of survival is almost negligible."

"You rreason too clearrly," was the sergeant's surly rejoinder.

"Granted," Farr bowed. "Yet I spoke only for you and the colonel. Speaking now for myself, I expect to survive and to bring back much matter of value."

He put on his helmet. The others did likewise.

Kzak spoke by radio: "Follow me to thiss elevatorr. Now down . . . Sso. Thiss iss almosst the lowesst level of ourr excavat-ionss. Follow me furrtherr."

They reached a small chamber like a lock panel of a ship. It was pitch dark and guarded by two heavily armed Martians, whose native sensory equipment made light unnecessary.

Kzak presented written orders, and the guards opened a port, carefully hidden from outside. The party emerged.

"No lightss," warned Kzak at once. "Not until we pierce the enemy liness—if we do. Range yourrselss quickly. The Venus-sians take flank possitionss. You, ssoldierr, at the rrear. If we are ssurrrprised, sstay out of any fight. One of us musst rreturn if possible. Private Farr, twenty paces in advance."

Farr chuckled into his helmet-microphone. "Alone, with glory fluttering over me," he half chanted. "Alone, as Lucifer at war with heaven."

"What was that?"

"A speech credited to an ancient poet named Cyrano de Bergerac. You wouldn't understand, Sergeant. Shall we move out?"

It was as though he, not Kzak, gave the order. The group, ranged like an open diamond, began to steal down-slope toward the distant flecks of light that marked the ranks of beleaguering Stygians.

I F William Farr's helmeted ears did not burn as he moved cautiously downward in the dark, it was not for want of being talked about.

Colonel Barlund was entertaining three newcomers in his headquarters in the upper reaches of the fortress, but his manner was not that of a carefree host. He stood erect and stiff, as was his wont when nonplussed, and his eyes traveled from one to another of his visitors.

Well might a simple colonel of an outer garrison gaze in awe. Before him were three of the seven chief councillors of the Martio-Terrestrial League.

"I offer this again, with all respect," the

colonel ventured once more. "He came to me as a recruit, under a false name, denying even that he knew anything about command or military life. I treated him as just a common man."

"You tell us, then, that common men are sent by you—untrained and unwarned—into certain death." Those words were spoken by a woman, handsome but austere.

Her name was Naomi Tennant, and she was the newest-chosen member of the League Council. Tall and noble of figure, she looked rather like the statue of an ancient goddess with her braided brown hair and her gracefully draped robe of office. Her eyes were green and biting as they fixed on the colonel.

"I wrote you a note, on the very eve of my election," she reminded. "I pointed out that the man known as William Farr was someone to merit special treatment."

"He put me off with—evasions," miserably pleaded Colonel Barlund. "He even badgered me, by disobedience, into decreeing this punishment—"

Naomi Tennant almost snarled, if a regal beauty is able to snarl. One of her companions, a Martian Councillor in a dark maroon robe with gold figurings, mimicked Terrestrial laughter in his artificial voice-box. His flowery head wagged and nodded.

"Naomi iss desserrvedly upset," he said. "Sshe hopes to marry her fellow-Councillor, the man you know as William Farr."

"He's a League Councillor, then," Barlund fairly groaned. One hand clawed shakily at his disordered hair. Matters were getting worse all the time.

"Who else would we come after—all this way, in person, in a special ship?" demanded the third visitor, a booming, gorgeously clad Venusian. He was Gmapul, richest and most capable of his race, and his ordinarily deafening voice now rang with two-fold volume in his earnestness. "William Farr is in reality William Farnol Drake, second senior of the Council—and, as you may know, the Earth's foremost aristocrat."

"For thirty generations of scientific supervision, the Drakes have been bred and trained for leadership," put in Naomi Tennant, "in order that the last and greatest of them should be tossed away like a nutshell by a stupid military bully."

Barlund wished that he might faint. But colonels are not chosen from among fainting men.

He made a last appeal. "I've heard of

William Farnol Drake—at twenty-six a Councillor, at twenty-eight a Chief Councillor, called the Ultimate Specimen and all that. But why, why did he come here, and on the terms he did?"

"Oh," said the Martian, still with his imitation laugh near the top, "I can tell that. I fear the least that Drake will perrish. He iss not the perrishing sorrnt. But listen:

"From the firrst we have held back from full conquest of Stygia. You have known smething of that. Colonel Barlund, for orrderrss have been to keep yourr footing, no more."

"Right," agreed Barlund, "though I never knew why."

"There was no occasion to tell you, but now you sshall hearr. Claimss have been clouded ass to which worldr hass chief right to Stygia—Earrth, Marrss, or Venus."

True enough, reflected Barlund. Early explorations and discoveries were mixed up, and reports differed.

The Martian continued: "Only within the rrecent ssessions of the Council was a decision reached. It was decreed that a new government be esstablished, mandated, and watched overr by all governmentss now in the League, to be sset at independence when considered worthy. And Drake asked forr full reportss from Stygia." A tentacle flourished. "He was not ssatisfied."

"What reports could we give?" asked Barlund plaintively. "We've been only lightly garrisoned and equipped, to keep no more than our footing, as you said. What you tell me, sir, makes it plain that we weren't supposed to dig too far into things. But we couldn't be expected to make full reports, could we?"

"Perrhappss not. Drrake did not find fault. He decided to come and see for himself."

"The idiot," contributed Naomi Tennant, in a soft contralto voice that caressed the word.

"It's Drake's way of doing things," put in the Venusian Gmapul. "He told me half of what he intended. He knew that if he came here as himself he'd be sheltered and shielded despite himself. And he wanted first-hand information. So—"

"So he came as a recruit," said Barlund. "But why didn't he lead a big, well-equipped army with him, to complete the conquest of Stygia? That would make sense."

"What he iss doing now makess ssense,

orr I missjude my frriend Drrake," assured the Martian.

Barlund felt a relaxation of the accusing tension around him. "If it's your will," he said briskly, "I'll fit out all my available troops as a party to go fetch him back. I hope—" he fought to keep his voice from shaking—"that it isn't too late. I'll go myself, but—"

"Wait," said Naomi Tennant. "He came here in person, for some scheme of his own. He went out there in person, trusting his own strength. And we—we followed him this distance in person, once I told you others that I'd learned where he went and that I'd sent a message about him."

"Well?" prompted Gmapul, with a froggy grin.

"Well," finished Naomi Tennant, "why do we wait? Aren't we Councillors? Leave Colonel Barlund to run his garrison. I dare say it needs him badly. Let's take a guide and go after him—the three of us in person still!"

CHAPTER III

A COUNCILLOR COMMANDS

KZAK, like most sergeants, had very little scruple and very much ambition. He had ventured out of the fortress on six previous patrols, and had brought back much of the limited information headquarters had about the lower altitudes of Stygia. Yet not once had he penetrated beyond the besieging lines into the dark, strangely-wooded plains that lay around the mountain.

His present patrol was exceptionally well equipped. Each armored man had shut in with his body a supply of food and drink, a radio, and electrical units to power his tools and weapons. Each was armed with electro-automatic rifle and pistol, MS-ray thrower, and grenades. Kzak, in addition, had a radio-control device whereby any grenades thrown into the air could be directed and propelled.

It would be sad, thought Kzak inside his snug helmet, if they could not penetrate the enemy positions, investigate beyond, and get back—at least some of them. He, Kzak, was a Martian. He needed no lights as Terrs-trials and Venusians did, and as Stygians evidently must, for they gave off a glow with their bodies. Casualties in his command would impress Colonel Barlund. A long trip, several adventures, and valuable

information—yes, and the destruction of this troublesome recruit, Farr. He, Kzak, would gain commendation, perhaps promotion.

"Attention!" he said into the microphone which would carry his voice to all hands. "I ssensse a trrail downhill at thiss point. Do not take it. The Sstygianss will undoubtedly guard itss lowerr end. Pull to the rright, and down."

Obediently the men veered from the smoother path. Farr, up ahead, was making clever progress in the gloom, almost as well as a Martian. The descent continued in silence, gropingly over rough rocks and once or twice dangerously down slides and past ledges. The glow of the Stygians greatedened below.

"Furrtherr rright," bade Kzak. "They arre concentrated too thickly immediately to ourr front. We must find a weak point."

Again they shifted their direction. Minutes passed.

Suddenly Farr, up ahead, spoke into his own mike: "Down, all. Movement just ahead."

Suiting action to word, Farr dropped behind a little nubbin of rock. His automatic rifle came handily to the fore. The others assumed prone positions, weapons at the ready. Kzak waited, then wormed cautiously forward at full length until he came close to Farr.

"What iss it?" he demanded.

For answer, Farr aimed his piece. Kzak came closer still, to where he could observe its sighting.

The rifle had a telescopic sight, with beyond-spectrum attachments that made light unnecessary. Thus Farr could see what it aimed at as well as Kzak. He was covering a point beyond and below, at perhaps eight hundred Earth yards distance.

There, indeed, were the lines and groups of the Stygians, like glowing, ambulant washtubs. But in their center was a dark ditch, full of shadows, extending at right angles to the line of defenses.

"Well?" prompted Kzak.

"That's a deep cut," replied Farr. "And no Stygians in it—or we'd see their glow. Some of us might sneak along it, and through."

"They arre too closse," clipped out the sergeant, glad of a chance to snub Farr. "We would be trapped."

"Not if somebody drew the attention of that part of the Stygians."

"And who darress?"

"I dare. Shall I show you?"

WITHOUT waiting for orders, Farr scrambled off at an angle, taking advantage of some swarthy-seeming, flesh-leaved bushes for cover.

Kzak watched him go, half started to call him back. Then he reconsidered. Let the too-wise Terrestrial be a decoy—and perish at the job. Kzak might profit by the very device indicated. . . .

He waited, and he had not long to wait. The stuffy air echoed suddenly to the futile-sounding *sput* of an electro-automatic pellet. Down among the Stygians a softly shining dome suddenly flamed as the thermal particle exploded within its vitals. The creature collapsed at the very lip of the little ravine.

The others seemed to grow tense and silent, as if searching for the source of that attack. Then they found it. Several of them moved away from their position.

From the strange satchels they wore, their tentacles drew forth weapons—tubes that spit fiery little arrows. A flight of these fell around a clump of the bushes halfway between Kzak and the Stygian lines. There was a blazing of light as the vegetation took fire from the projectiles. A red radiance came into being, and in its light was defined a big human figure in armor, posing a rifle. From that rifle came another *sput*, and another Stygian collapsed, its glow pointed up by its death agony.

Swift and knowing for all their clumsy seeming, Stygians moved toward the enemy. The crack went for the moment unguarded.

"Come, you otherrrs!" said Kzak at once, and led a rush downhill.

He sensed the beginning of the crack, and made straight for it. Meanwhile, the diversion offered by Farr went on.

The electro-automatic spoke again and yet again. These times it missed, but though fire-arrows pierced the big man's coverall he did not fall or flinch. His rifle fired, missing once more. Stygians made a concerted rush. Kzak saw that much, and then dropped into the shelter of the fissure. His men kept close at his heels.

Downward, along the bottom of the crack, they ran swiftly and silently. A few steps took them to a point many feet below the level of the battle, but they could hear the *sput-sput* of Farr's rifle, the heavy laboring of Stygians. Kzak was able to decide that he was past the outlying positions of the enemy, and after a final scamper he

drew his subordinates close. At his command they formed a pyramid, one on the shoulders of another. Kzak swarmed to the top and looked out.

It was dark here. He and his men were indeed behind the front lines of Stygians. He climbed forth, and the others with him. To right and left he could make out glowing groups of adversaries, but none at his immediate front.

"Come!" he commanded, and led the way outward. Not far from here would be the plains.

Had the patrol looked backward with eyes sharp enough they would have seen the end of the Stygian rush.

Half-a-dozen laboring hulks, like wise and fierce jelly-fish, gained the point where the armored figure seemed to crouch. Clutching tentacles shot to make a capture—and drew back, nonplussed.

The enemy was an empty overall, draped on a bush. The rifle had been propped to that empty costume's shoulder, and its electro-automatic firing mechanism had been hastily adjusted to the remote control of the radio Farr carried, in order to fire aimlessly but convincingly. Farr himself was nowhere to be seen.

WILLIAM FARNOL DRAKE, Senior

Councillor of the Martio-Terrestrial League, Director of Interplanetary Relations, Honorary Corps Commander of the Terrestrial Army, Honorary Vice-Admiral of the Martio-Terrestrial Space Navy, and private soldier of the Legion of the Dark, was trotting away into the dimness.

He had left his armor behind, for a decoy, but he still wore the metalloid uniform that housed gravity neutralizers and the glassite helmet that would keep his bronchial apparatus from too great a punishment from the thick atmosphere. The radio he carried was damaged by too-hasty improvising for remote control firing of the rifle. As he went he repaired it quickly and knowingly. There was little that Councillor Drake could not do.

Surprise was uppermost in his mind as he proceeded his unchallenged way downslope. Except for the single line of Stygians, no more than a guard-cordon, he had seen no enemy. From what he could learn of the constant siege of the Legion position, Stygian forces had always lain thick and well arranged around the lower reaches of

the mountain. What did this absence of opposition portend?

He slid and stumbled lower still. The darkness grew around him, and he dared turn on a very small blue light which hung to his belt. It showed him that the upper brush of vegetation which first had given him cover was giving way to what might be termed tree-thickets—plants with stems, anyway, and upward-spreading foliage. No greenness here, but pallor. Probably nothing approximating chlorophyll—radiations, not light, would be the life force. Drake, also a botanist and comparative bio-chemist, paused long enough to prod at some roots. They were set into hard soil—very hard soil—like filigree work into metal.

A trail ran among the trees, and Drake, unlike Kzak, decided to follow it. Smoothness underfoot suggested much use—by Stygians. He switched off his light again and took a pistol in his right hand. Cautiously he groped his way downward.

Then, abruptly and with no warning, he came to where he could observe and understand.

The trail led him out upon a bare ledge. From its lip he could look down upon the plain, a plain which came directly to the base of the great mountain, without benefit of foothills, and which was made visible by many fires.

Drake decided that those fires might be volcanic, or the glare from underground foundries and smelting shops—or perhaps both. In any case, silhouetted against them were strange, sprawling sheds and houses, and skeleton frameworks that must be industrial derricks or even radio masts. The Stygians were plainly of advanced culture. Closer to him were the Stygians themselves, countless masses of them.

At this point the plain sank into a valley shaped like a shallow bowl. The sides of the bowl, rising at a gentle slant toward the level of the plain, and fringed with vegetation, were pocked and pierced with cavelike doors and cut into terraces. It was like an ancient cliff-dwellers' own, and in and out of the doors and along the terraces and runways swarmed Stygians. So many and thick were they that the light of their rounded bodies made all the scene clear to Drake, even at such a distance.

"That's a sight no Inner-World explorer ever saw and lived to tell," he said to himself. "If my radio was working right I'd try to get hold of headquarters, and—" He

broke off, wondering if he himself would live to tell of his discovery.

He studied the great valleyful of enemy, then strained his eyes to see into the less-lighted plains beyond and above. After a moment he lifted something—the telescopic sight which he had taken from the abandoned rifle. It helped him to a clearer view.

"Ah!" he breathed to himself.

For at one point on the bowl's rim was a great ramp that gave access to the plain and, beyond, to a broad way up the mountain. Here were Stygians, invisible from a distance with the unaided eye. They were able to turn off their natural lights.

THEY came upward in groups, ordered and disciplined. Each group paused while several Stygians stationed there dealt out little dark bundles. These, opened up, proved to be canopies or cloaks, which covered the bodies of the shining creatures. Thus masked, each group trudged away and uphill.

Drake's sight quested here and there. The valley seemed to be a depot or concentration point, perhaps connected with rear positions by great underground tunnels, for it spewed forth an inexhaustible stream of fighting Stygians. And they were bound—upward.

That's it, thought Drake. That's why there was only a token string of guards around the upper reaches. They've withdrawn their forces, and they're equipping a major attack! Thousands—tens of thousands—against our hundreds!

Again he wished for a clear radio connection with his base. He prodded dials and connections again. The mechanism only mumbled faintly. He skirted the rim of his ledge and began to push through trees in the direction of the upward stream of Stygians.

He dared not come too close. When the vibration of the ground told him that he was within sprinting distance of the main march he paused, pondered, and finally climbed a tree. It was sweaty-barked, but he managed to reach an upper fork. His sight picked out the travel-way, thronged with Stygians in platoon-like groups, each group made up of thirty or so in regular ranks, with a slightly larger leader, evidently to command and direct.

"Why," Drake asked himself, "did they start from here? Why not from farther up?"

His orderly mind dug answer after answer out of consciousness, and rejected each one. While he mused and questioned, something

crashed in the shrubbery below, something heavy and purposeful. He glanced downward, eyes straining for a glimpse through the smut-dark air.

Something like an open and animated umbrella came blundering along—a Stygian flanker, reconnoitering to one side of the main body!

Drake smiled inside his helmet. This was just what he wanted.

Quickly he fingered the butts of several weapons at his belt. He decided against the obliterating ray-thrower, the almost equally destructive automatic pistol with its explosive pellet of fire. He drew a pistol-gripped weapon which bore, instead of barrel, a long, lean spindle that came to a thorn-sharp point—a dagger syringe, the universal first-aid device of all front-line soldiers.

Several studs on the handle powered the syringe to spout this or that liquid medication. Drake pressed the one that released a charge of anesthetic into the barrel. He hoped that the Stygian below was not too different from Inner-World organisms, and, as it paused almost at the foot of his tree, he jumped.

He landed astride the thing, which was rather bigger than a Galapagos tortoise. It quivered and started forward, but he had stabbed his syringe into its very center and touched the trigger-switch. Abruptly, and as he had optimistically hoped, it subsided flabbily. A powerful dose of drug had rendered it unconscious.

Quickly he knelt beside it and peeled away the masking canopy. The light of the sleeping Stygian was enough to show him its anatomy—jelly-flesh inside a tough rind, collapsed limbs and tentacles, a quietly throbbing nucleus in its center. It showed him also the slung satchel which bore tools, weapons, and other devices.

He fumbled them forth, wondering what they were. In so doing he touched the Stygian itself and plucked his hand back with a soft exclamation.

"Vibration. . . But it's asleep. What—" He bent his head close to his defective radio.

"Static, too! The thing has some sort of a power-mechanism. . . . Oop! Here it is."

He brought a watch-sized object from the satchel, examined it, and touched a stud. The static hum ceased, the Stygian's sleeping bulk seemed less radiant. He touched it again and experienced no vibration.

He saw now that the body was cased in a

tight, transparent shell of artificial construction, a shell that had vibrated to the watch-like mechanism. Armor against weapons? But his syringe had pierced it like cloth. Well then, armor against what?

He lifted a hand as if to scratch his head, but his helmet stopped his fingers. Instead, inspiration smote him as if between the eyes.

"That's it! We need helmets to fight pressure down here. They need armor against the absence of pressure up above!"

He fingered the watch-things. "And this isn't power enough; it's only a receiver! Somewhere below—in that bowl-valley—is the central sending machine that gives them artificial pressure and enables them to come up and fight us!"

There was more noise in the bushes. He drew back from the Stygian, exchanging syringe for pistol. A dark figure, two-legged and helmeted, was making its way toward him.

"Hi!" yelled Drake, loud enough to be heard beyond his helmet.

The figure paused and held up a tentacle. "Quiet, you sorry fool. . . . Oh, pardon, sirr. Please make less noise, Excellency—Councillorr Drake—"

"Sergeant Kzak!" Drake hurried toward him. "You were following me?"

"Sheerr chance, sirr! My whole patrolr iss sscattered, hunting forr you! Threer of yourr associate Councillorrss arre up in headquartterr—~~and, meanwhile, the grreatest force of Sstygiannss everr muss-tered against uss~~ hass begun the attack!"

BY the time Kzak's radio had summoned the rest of the patrol, Drake had formed a plan. As he explained it to Kzak, he worked over the canopy he had peeled from the unconscious Stygian.

"We're only six, and they're countless," he pointed out. "We can't even fight our way home, let alone overthrow them. Not unless we hit the very heart of the matter."

"The heart? How?"

"Too much to explain just now. Leave it at this: Down yonder is a device that makes it possible for them to go up into altitudes which would ordinarily distress them. I'll handle it, but this time you and the others will form a decoy—the same way I did, by a fake attack."

"But how will you rreach theierr basse?" demanded Kzak.

Drake showed him the canopy. He had

torn a great vinelike growth from a tree trunk and bent it into a circle to stiffen the edge. Other pieces he had curved inside, like umbrella ribs. The canopy thus held its form as though over a real Stygian dome-body.

"Under this," said Drake. "Don't goggle, you others. I know it's crude, but there's darkness to help. Now, let me have your ray-throwers."

"We need them badly," objected a Venusian.

"I'll need them worse. Hand them over."

They did so, as if he outranked Kzak. He shoved them into his belt and lifted the frame-supported canopy.

"Now follow me!"

He led them to the ledge. There they pieced together bits of line from their belt-pouches, and he was the first to swing down to the levels below. More scrambling and groping brought them to the plain itself. They crouched in clumps of grassy undergrowth.

"Open orrdrerr!" commanded Kzak. "Now—advance on my ssignal!"

Four of his men fanned out. One moved forward to new cover, taking up a position for observation and fire. Another crept to the new line, another and another. Thus cautiously the patrol advanced on that great den of Stygians. No challenge was made; enemy attention was elsewhere.

Kzak's Martian awareness-sense told him a little of Drake's sidewise journey, then forward movement—Drake, under the frame-supported canopy, very like a masked Stygian in the dim light.

Kzak waited long enough for Drake to approach whatever objective he had in mind, then shouted, "Open firre!"

From positions where they could see something of the valley's interior, the members of the patrol began to shoot with auto-rifles, swiftly but with precision.

There was a momentary confusion and wonder on the part of the Stygians; then dozens of glowing forms, their fire-arrow weapons ready in their tentacles, began to bob into view and commence a return fire. For a moment there was no real contest, for the Legionaries fought from the dark and had illuminated targets at which to shoot. But fire-arrows set blazes here and there in the plain and revealed the crouching men. Within seconds, Kzak reflected soberly, they must retreat or be obliterated.

But over beyond the valley, at the point to which Drake had won, blazed sudden

palid streaks of fire. Kzak made out the canopy disguise, flying upward as if propelled by rocket blasts. Substantially, just that thing was happening.

It was for this that Drake had collected his comrades' ray-throwers. Holding one in each hand, he blasted strongly against the hard ground. That hard ground gave the rays purchase and resistance. He was lifted upward and on high by the very recoil.

"Then Stygia's crust is full of metal!" he told himself. "Interesting—probably valuable. . . ."

Shifting his blast, he hurled himself through the air above the valley. His position was noted, seemed to mystify the Stygians. Then they fired arrows at him, too.

But he saw what he wanted. Two of his ray-weapons were exhausted. He dropped them and in mid-air began to fall. The canopy to which he had fastened himself acted like a parachute in the dense air. He had time to draw two more ray-throwers, direct them downward, not at the Stygians, but at a whirling, jumping arrangement of machinery bolted to a platform at the bottom of the dip.

At touch of the powerful ray-beams the whole fabric seemed to shudder and burst into glows. Drake heard the scream of jammed and outraged gears, belts, connections. Then—silence!

He had destroyed the mechanism that gave pressure to the upward-mounting throngs of attackers.

The Stygians were plainly agast. Their attention whipped away from the menace of attack by the Sky-Devils they fought. A milling horde of them rushed at the wrecked engines.

With stabbing rays Drake hurled himself clear of the position above the valley. Then, clinging to his parachute canopy, he let himself drop downward. He fell heavily, but not heavily enough to injure himself.

When he arose after a moment Kzak was near.

"What orrderrrs?" the sergeant was asking him.

"Retreat upward, quickly!"

The patrol needed no second bidding.

NOISE of battle shook and buffeted the fortress of the Legion. Barlund, at his look-out post, took time to bewail the day he had ever accepted command.

"First that Senior Councillor here for a masquerade, then these others, searching for

him and losing themselves, then a mass attack of Stygians that will wipe them all out—and probably the rest of us!" He was able to find relief in the last thought. "At least I'll die and be out of harm's way. No reprimands or court-martials, or—"

He broke off. So had the noise. He whirled toward Captain Renald.

"Why has the firing ceased? Get 'em on the speaker system."

Renald was already doing so.

"Sir," he reported, "the enemy isn't advancing."

"Retreating?"

"No—just not advancing. They've all stopped. . . . No, the look-outs say that there's movement—of men!"

Barlund took the microphone. "Hello, outpost!" he called. "Report!"

"Patrol returning, sir," came a voice. "No, not patrol. Those Councillors, sir. They say—"

Another voice, booming and triumphant—Gmapul the Venusian—was on the speaker system. "Colonel! The attackers have gone to sleep!"

"What?"

"Just what I say. No movement anywhere—thousands of them motionless! We were hiding in a hole in the rock and we saw. It's like a big wave of sleeping sickness, or a plague!"

Barlund turned from the microphone.

"Renald," he asked, "is my hair growing even whiter than usual?" Then, he turned back to the mike, asked, "What happened? How?"

His receiver buzzed, and yet another voice came in, a slurring Martian voice: "Colonel Barlund? Ssergeant Kzak rreporting."

"Kzak!" Barlund's heart seemed to spin on its point like a top. "Are you bringing Councillor Drake back with you?"

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"No, ssirr. He iss bringing uss back with him. And when he comess, he'll tell you why the Sstygiasss are defeated."

Barlund sat down on the floor of the kiosk.

"Renald," he said quickly, "take over. Your first act of responsibility will be to have an orderly bring me a big drink of the strongest liquor on Stygia."

THE aftermath was a conference in Colonel Barlund's office, with the four Councillors playing host. The special ship of the Council expedition had come liberally stocked with luxuries—especially drinks. The Martian Councillor inhaled a dusty stimulant which only his race could take without going insane. Gmapul, the Venusian, drank *gail*, with an impolite smack of his enormous mouth. Colonel Barlund was old-fashioned enough for simple Terrestrial vodka. William Farnol Drake and Naomi, sipping twin silver cups of fragrant, blended wine, smiled at each others.

"All's stagnant that ends well," paraphrased Gmapul. "I suppose the war's over here, and the Legion will grow fat and stodgy."

"It's not over, and won't be for many a long day," said Barlund at once. "All that happened was that we nullified their device that allows them to come up here. It'll take them time to repair and restart it. Meanwhile we can be ready."

"Meanwhile," added Drake, "we may be able to propose peace terms."

"Yes?" prompted Barlund, pricking up his ears.

"That big pink Stygian the men brought in was a leader of some sort," Drake informed him. "He and two other important-seeming captives are in a pressure chamber, revived. Sergeant Kzak and one other intelligence non-com are on the outside of a glassite pane, working out a system of signal-communications. Already they have rudiments of understanding."

"Understanding!" repeated Naomi. "If they find out we aren't enemies after all—"

"We can stop fighting and start co-operating. You see, we thought they were menaces. They evidently thought the same of us. But if we can declare a truce and get on terms of trade and mutual aid—isn't that the history of most interplanetary relations? War, then peace, then prosperous cooperation?"

"True of Venus," agreed Gmapul. "Any more *gail* in that container?"

"Plenty," the Martian Councillor told him. "And, though it iss bad taste forr Martianss to rememeberr it, we and Earrrth had a terrible war in the Twenty-eighth Century. . . . You sspeak, Drake, ass if therre will be no taking possession herre by the Innerr Worrrldss."

"Not if I can help it," said Drake. "See what the Stygians will do toward making peace. If they stand hitched, we can do likewise. Aren't there four Councillors here, enough to change policy? You're all with me, aren't you?"

"I am," assured Naomi softly.

"And we arre," added the Martian. "But what profitss—"

Drake pointed to a table where lay lumps of mineral.

"See those? We picked them up on the plain below here. This mountain is only a rocky bubble, blown up long ago by volcanic action. Stygia itself is a big bounding ball of metals and alloys—enough to feed all the foundries and factories of the System. The Stygians know something of how to use these things, I judge; but we know more. Leave full development to our scientific missions—after peace."

"You speak of peace as inevitable," said Barlund, a little sourly. "No soldier can quite accept the end of war."

"It's always inevitable, Colonel. The Stygians are forced to pause. We're willing to pause. We have a leader, with whom we can get into communication. He can take messages back. Let us hope—"

An orderly appeared and saluted. Barlund gave him a nodded permission to speak.

"If you please," ventured the orderly. "Sergeant Kzak says that he can understand the captive Stygians, and they can understand him. They request that he interpret a message to the commanders."

The Councillors looked at each other.

"Sounds promising," said Drake. "Shall we go and see?"

He rose, and was joined by Namoi, who put her hand through his arm.

"It sounds like the end of an adventure," she said. "I hope, William, you don't begin any other adventures without me."

Drake opened his mouth to speak.

"Carrefull!" warned his Martian friend.

"Make no answwerr, Drrake, if you carre to keep yourr reputation ass a sstatessman."

THE END

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THE DARKER LIGHT

by CLEVE CARTMILL



Would you trade your reason for the sanity of a world? Would you choose to live in eternal horror—that Tomorrow might dawn for your people?

CHAPTER I

"I WANT TO DESTROY"

JEREMY LAWTON resisted an impulse to hurl his drink into the bartender's fat face. He clenched one hand around the tall plastiglass; he pressed his wide mouth into a thin line; he glared at the round, pleasant countenance.

"Haven't you any pride?" he snarled. "Are you going to let me call you every vile name I can lay my tongue to—and just grin? Do you call yourself a man?"

The bartender chuckled. "What else, Citizen?"

"What else!" Jeremy snorted. He turned to his neighbor, a man with a public-utility stripe across his tunic. "You've heard me, Citizen. I have flung insults in his teeth, and he smiles. Isn't that a hell of a depth for a man to sink to?"

Public Utilities gave Jeremy a blank stare. He turned this on the amused bartender.

"What's he talking about?"

The bartender's paunch shook with silent laughter. "I don't know, Citizen. I haven't enjoyed myself so much in months."

"You, too," Jeremy sneered at Public Utilities. "Cattle! The whole damned race. Look at 'em!" He waved a hand at the placid groups of customers around plastible, chatting, sipping their harmless drinks. "Not a question, not a thought—just dull acceptance of what the Light has made them."

Public Utilities blinked.

"How did the Light get into this?"

Jeremy clutched thick black hair with his lean hands.

"Give me strength," he muttered. "I don't want to mash your face to a pulp, but I think I will. I—" He broke off. His broad shoulders slumped. "What's the use? They'll never see it."

His boyish face set in lines of despair. He stared moodily at his glass. Suddenly, he closed his fist around it, raised it to throwing position. He eyed the bartender.

"Do you value that mirror?"

"Why, yes, Citizen," the bartender said mildly. "It can't be replaced. It's glass, you know."

Jeremy flung his plastiglass. Its heavy base shattered the mirror behind the bartender. A thousand cracks spread fanwise from the point of contact. A few slivers tinkled to the floor.

The crash drew attention. Men and women turned their eyes, stared, shook their heads, made clucking sounds, returned to their own affairs. The bartender assumed an expression of vague sadness.

"An unfortunate accident, Citizen," he murmured.

"That was no accident!" Jeremy cried hotly. "And what are you going to do about it?"

"No accident? It must have been," Public Utilities said.

Jeremy whirled. "Keep out of this! I say it was no accident. It was deliberate—and

it was wonderful. But you wouldn't know about that, nor would any of these other clods. You can't imagine the wild joy that comes with destruction. It's beyond your mental capacity, you empty-headed cipher. You've been robbed of imagination by the Light, you poor dupe."

"It couldn't have been anything but an accident," the man persisted. "That's all it could have been, Citizen," he repeated with dull conviction.

Jeremy got to his feet. He seized the man's shoulder, whirled him around on the stool.

"See if you call this an accident," he grated, and smashed his closed fist into the middle of the man's pleasant face.

FOR the first time in his twenty years of life, Jeremy Lawton knew the high exultation of physical violence. The crunch of cartilage shot an ecstatic tingle up his lean arm. His heart picked up the excitement and hurled it in mighty surges along his blood stream. His dark eyes sparkled with physical pleasure as he watched Public Utilities rock against the bar and fall unconscious to the gleaming plastic floor.

Jeremy stood over the fallen man and sucked at torn knuckles. He wanted to howl with triumph, to tilt his lean head skyward and shout his challenge to the world—

"Come one, come all, Jeremy Lawton is master!"

He had subjugated an opponent, and in that moment he knew the wild joy that comes with victory. He knew, too, that this was the lost heritage of all men. If he could feel it, so could they. So *should* they, he thought with grim resolve. So should they—once the Light was destroyed.

He became aware of mild, deploring sounds. He whirled, eyes shining, to see a ring of men and women gazing sadly at the unconscious man.

They wagged their heads, clucked their tongues, murmured, "Too bad," and "Sad accident," and stood inactive.

"Call a monitor!" Jeremy challenged them. "Let's see what he'll make of it."

An emergency whistle sounded from the front entrance and a monitor shouldered through the crowd with his medical kit. He knelt over Public Utilities, felt at his broken nose, and injected a drug into his veins.

"An unfortunate accident," he said. "He will need medical attention. Is anyone else hurt?" He spied Jeremy's bleeding knuckles. "Here, Citizen, let me bandage that."

Jeremy held out his hand for treatment. "It was no accident," he said smugly. "I hit him in the face with my fist, because I felt like it. I wanted to—understand?"

The monitor did not raise his head. "This will be all right by tomorrow, Citizen. It won't incapacitate you. And we'll have the other back together like new in a few days."

"But it wasn't an accident! It was deliberate!"

The monitor raised his head, frowned with effort to understand, dropped his puzzled eyes, and went on with his bandaging.

"I don't know what you mean, Citizen." He put the finishing touch on the bandage. "Will you help me put this man in the ambulance, some of you?"

They carried Public Utilities out, laid him in the ambulance, and watched it whisk him over roof tops toward Central City Hospital.

Jeremy quivered with frustrated rage. He had tried, in the most pointed fashion, to arouse them—but they were beyond awakening. He stood on wide-spread feet and scowled at the floor.

He was flooded once more with despairing loneliness. One imaginative mind among these stultified creatures was doomed to eternal aloneness. There was no one to share his thoughts, to help him build a new world. A world in which man could soar again to creative heights, as outlined in the books which only he, apparently, had any desire to read. He had been told by the custodian of the ancient relics that others had looked at the books—but none had borrowed them.

Jeremy could not understand this, for they told of brilliant feats, of joyous combat, of unfettered minds—they told of what man had lost in the Light.

Now he, in his first move to re-establish that golden age of endeavor, had met with dull incomprehension. So bright had been his dream when he came here tonight. It had seemed so simple—depart from the norm and arouse others of his kind. With them destroy the mental shackles that chained men to the depths. With them destroy the Light that fetters.

A voice broke through his gloom. It was a soft, a shrewd, a knowing voice.

"That was no accident, Citizen. That was a deliberate act of destruction."

Jeremy swiveled his head. A slim, middle-aged man eyed him speculatively. In those small, gray eyes Jeremy detected fires of curiosity, of awakening. The man wore the stripe of a food administrator—and he wore

an air that stirred hope and dreams of adventure in Jeremy's breast.

They stared long at one another—the youth and the man. Presently Jeremy put his bandaged hand on the other's thin shoulder.

"Come with me, Citizen."

CHAPTER II

REVOLT OF THE MEEK

HAROLD BLACK was on the verge of leaving his Philadelphia apartment to attend a dance for fellow atomic-power workers. He pressed the time stud on his wrist radio. When the voice told the hour he realized that his chronic nervousness had hurried his dressing and he was a few minutes early.

He toyed with the dials of his televisior, intending to find a newscast that would consume the time remaining before his departure. When the strange young face, lean and dark, filled his screen, he did not pass it by. It was silent at the instant he tuned in, but an intensity of expression, a gleam of dark eyes, held his fingers. When the face spoke, he leaned back to listen.

"Who I am," it said, "is unimportant. And what I say will mean nothing to the mass of world citizens. It will mean everything to a few. That few are those not cast exactly in the mold. They will have known strange uneasiness, powerful but nameless urges. They will be quick of decision, and their decisions will not necessarily conform to stated codes. If you are one of these—listen!"

Harold Black began to listen. The dance was soon forgotten. . . .

The telecast was transferred to Chief Monitor Gimbel's office screen from the department's listening tower where all programs were scrutinized by appointed experts. Chief Gimbel's massive face took on a puzzled expression as he listened to the young man in the screen.

"I will bring this message to you each day at this time," he said. "It is the story of how man has been dulled, stifled, until he is little better than a domesticated animal. He has been degraded by the Light." The young face became bitter. "The Light of Reason, it is called. Let us examine this Light . . ."

Chief Gimbel summoned his aides. He eyed the quartet plaintively. He waved at the screen.

"Was that scheduled?" he asked.

"No, sir," one informed him. "The station is not listed, either. It's operating without legal sanction."

"But that's against the code," the chief complained.

"Yes, sir."

"Then why don't we do something about it?"

"What can we do, sir?"

"We can find the station," the chief said.

"We have found it. But what then? We are powerless to interfere. The code expressly says that there shall be no interference with citizens except in the event of accidents."

"Something ought to be done," the chief said vaguely.

BARBARA WELLS was taking an ultra-violet-prime bath when the dark face came into her ceiling screen. The gaze was so intense, so personal, that she instinctively drew a cover over her lithe, brown body. Then she gazed up from her couch with breathless concentration. She was stirred by the voice. Stirred, and more, for the message focused to some degree nameless excitements she had known, it seemed, all her life.

"I have here in the studio," the voice said, "recordings from historical archives. They have collected dust for nearly two centuries. Nobody has displayed curiosity about them since they were filed. I am going to show them to you so that you will see how an insidious darkening of man's brilliance occurred in the name of reason. . . ."

History unrolled from a plastic tape and filled the screens of half a dozen persons who had not switched to sanctioned programs.

There was the scene between Professor Alex Wilson and the Psychological Council.

Professor Wilson pounded on the council table. "In the hospital for the mentally deranged, where I am employed as chief consultant, gentlemen, we have experimented with this Light. In every case of abnormality we have had a glowing success. The patients have lost their moods of mania and depression. Schizos have succeeded in bringing their various personalities into one unified whole. We have no more screams in the night, no more cowering from shadows, no more dreams! No more dreams, do you understand? It has made useful citizens of

those who were forever lost to society. It must be adopted, gentlemen, on a worldwide scale. Not only for mental cases—but for all men! It will bring everlasting peace.”

The council was dubious.

“There have been dreams of world peace before,” the chairman said, “and even as we dream of it here, there is the beat of distant drums. Don’t you keep up with events, Professor Wilson?”

Professor Wilson flushed. “That man is mad,” he said impatiently. “This is not the first time in history that psychotics in Southern Europe have fanned war into flame. Grant me the right to construct a gigantic Light—and you’ll see this threat of war die away. I’m serious, men. In that model on the table you have the fate of the world. Its invisible rays soothe, remove greed, lust for power, and all the other mental factors which have made chaos since the beginning of time. It does not, however, affect the strictly normal person. But let me show you. Let me activate it. It will be effective on this whole group.”

Professor Wilson applied power to the small, colorless pillar that stood in the center of the table. Then, over the frowning countenances of council members stole an expression of contentment, peace, and satisfaction. Lines disappeared from foreheads, hands unclenched. Eyes stopped burning, mouths relaxed.

Professor Wilson cut the power—and the faces were normal again.

Not quite normal, though. An air of pleasant contemplation was manifest in the group. They were no longer as dubious.

“What is your plan of action?” the chairman inquired.

“I propose to construct a Light—I call it the Light of Reason, gentlemen—of magnificent proportions. One that will handle enough power to project its effect all over the world. Then I propose to watch results.”

The half-dozen screens in scattered parts of the world that carried this scene blanked out. The lean face of Jeremy Lawton filled them again.

“For those who are still listening,” he said, “there is no need to show in detail how Professor Wilson was allowed to experiment; how the Light accomplished predicted results; how war died out; how a world dictatorship came into being. But there is need to point out facts.

“All men became equal—equally dull. The dictator is chosen according to rule

and has become no more than a superintendent of the Light. Police, who were a stimulating deterrent in those days, have become monitors, experts in first-aid only. Scientific progress has died. No single invention to make life easier, or more comfortable, or more exciting, has been recorded in nearly two hundred years.

“In days before the Light, men were creative. They composed stirring musical and literary works—according to ancient historical volumes I have read. A place in the sun—it was called—was the heritage of all men, and they reached it according to their ability.

“But the word genius has no meaning now. Men have forgotten how to live, have learned how to exist. This civilization has died, as an ancient philosopher put it, from an overdose of First Principles. As dictatorships of history died from becoming too dictatorial, monarchies too monarchical, so the Light of Reason has killed those faculties which were above reason, and which were man’s heritage in contradistinction to those of the animals.

“But I am not merely calling these facts to your attention. I have a plan of action. I believe that there are others capable of understanding the depth of degradation wrought by this darker Light. Let us meet, let us plan, and let us put out this damned Light forever. Let us restore man to his place in the sun!

“I am going to give you my name and address. Communicate with me. Come to me—”

“THERE is only one answer,” Jeremy Lawton told the seven in his apartment. “Revolution!”

The slim, middle-aged food administrator interrupted. “I doubt,” he said dryly, “if any here know the meaning of the term, Citizen.”

“You’re right, Dr. Barton,” Jeremy went on. He turned to the others. “Since I made the first telecast four months ago I’ve put in some long hours on the old records. I studied the technique of revolt. It means, simply, gaining control of something somebody else controls. In this case, the Light.”

Barbara Wells asked, “What do we do with it when we’ve got it? We can’t hide it in here.”

A grin circulated. The Light was eight hundred and thirty feet tall. The men looked at her, tall and slim and yellow-haired, with appreciative eyes.

"We smash it," Jeremy said simply. "Smash the mechanism that operates it. You know, of course, that there is only one Light, and its secret has been long since forgotten. Amplifying receivers in every city in the world pick up its emanations and retransmit them in their communities. Destroy the Light, destroy the source—and man is whole again."

Harold Black unfolded himself from a long divan. He towered in the room, lank, stoop-shouldered, stringy-haired, intense.

"There isn't any mechanism," he said. "No moving parts."

"But surely," Jeremy protested, "there is a nuclear receptor that could be smashed."

"We-el," Black drawled, "There is, but almost nobody knows how to find it."

"Do you?"

"Yes, but I doubt if there are more than three others who know about it."

"As long as you know, we're all right—if you don't get killed."

Dr. Barton interposed again. "I'd like to make a proposal."

Jeremy sat down. They listened to the slim food administrator.

"When I first talked to Citizen Lawton," Dr. Barton began, "nearly a year ago, I was caught up in the idealism of his proposition. Those aberrations, those departures from the norm which the Light subdues, were what men lived by. Dreams, real and fanciful. Hope. Brilliant feats without frames of reference. I thought they should be restored. I no longer think so."

Jeremy frowned, swept the group with dark, questioning eyes. They were intent on Dr. Barton.

"They had wars in those days," Dr. Barton went on. "There was bloodshed on a vast scale. There were suicides, murders, anti-social acts without number that swelled the sum total of human unhappiness. Are we going to restore those conditions? I think not."

Jeremy's frown became a scowl.

"It has occurred to me," Dr. Barton continued, "that we here are in a most satisfying position. The world is ours, to remake as we choose. We are the stand-outs. We have imagination, intelligence. Why, in the practical sense, should we bother with the others? Ideals are all very well, and I'll admit that I put up the money for a television station and money to bring you here, while motivated by ideals. But, after all, we

have our lives to live. I advocate that we live them."

Jeremy interrupted hotly, "And make slaves of those we propose to liberate? We won't do it. I forbid it!"

"And who," Dr. Barton inquired in his soft, shrewd voice, "are you to forbid?"

"The next dictator!" Jeremy snapped.

"Ah?" Dr. Barton eyed the group, one by one. "If we choose to allow it only, Citizen. You have presented your case. Let me present mine, and then let us have a show of wills."

Dr. Barton's proposal was simplicity itself. Allow the Light to continue in operation, overthrow the present dictatorship, establish their own. Then live in such luxury as they desired, remake the laws to suit their ends, and provide that the dictatorship of their kind continue forever.

He did not state it so badly—but that was the gist. And they listened, listened intently when he told of pleasures they could achieve after amending present codes. He built them a world which appealed. There was no doubt of its appeal to the others, Jeremy could see.

"But we can't!" he cried. "The whole idea behind this meeting is to liberate men from the Light. That's why we're here. I won't listen to any more of this. You're trying to make men domestic animals living for our pleasure. Sit down, Doctor."

"I suggest a vote," Dr. Barton insisted, his small gray eyes steady as his voice. "How do you vote, Citizen Wells?"

Barbara Wells smiled. "I'll string along with Jeremy. I like the way his hair curls."

"I like your idea, Doctor," Harold Black said.

Rhodes Fisher, a fat young man from South Africa, kneaded his cheek with a chubby fist.

"I don't know exactly what you're talking about. I think Citizen Wells is awful pretty, though. Whatever she does is all right with me."

Carl Blue, lounging in a corner, lit a cigarette while Dr. Barton's eyes questioned.

"What's in it for me?" he asked dryly. "I'm just beginning to get the idea behind Dr. Barton's proposition. What do you offer, Citizen Barton?"

Dr. Barton smiled. "A man after my own heart, Citizen. What do I offer? Wealth, high social position, pretty women."

"And you?" Carl Blue asked Jeremy. "What do you offer?"

"A chance to do mankind the greatest service in history," Jeremy said shortly.

Blue sighed. "I'm afraid I'm practical. You have my vote, Doctor."

Abdul Hamid and Ray Ford remained. The former, hawk-faced, dark, with flashing teeth, cast his lot with Barton. Ford, with an eager smile for Barbara Wells, moved to her side.

"An impasse," Dr. Barton said softly. "Well, time will tell."

Jeremy, flushed with anger, strode to Dr. Barton's side and glowered down at him.

"Get out of here!" Jeremy grated. "Get—out!"

DR. BARTON'S lips twitched with faint amusement. "A convert to my code," he commented. "You see, Citizen, you are subscribing to my theory. If anything interferes—eliminate it."

"I said get out," Jeremy answered coldly. "Or I'll put you out."

Dr. Barton's face set. "If you are going to be troublesome, young man, you are in for trouble of another sort." He turned imperious eyes on Harold Black.

"Protect me!" he commanded.

Black was instantly on his feet, towering over Jeremy.

"Citizen, leave him alone. Leave the dictator alone."

Jeremy glared up at Black. He calculated distances in his mind, and put all his weight in a short, jabbing punch at Black's face. As it connected he felt once more that fierce joy of combat. His heart pounded, blood suffused his face. He wanted to howl.

Black, too, apparently was caught up in this strange delight. His head rocked back from Jeremy's blow, and he growled deep in his chest as he caught Jeremy's throat in both hands. They fell to the floor, gasping, growling, kicking.

The others watched, fascinated. Barbara Wells put both hands against her cheeks, breathed in quick gasps. Abdul Hamid's dark face took on a look of evil glee. Ray Ford's mouth dropped open. Carl Blue and Dr. Barton showed an amused aloofness as the two young men threshed about the plastic floor. Rhodes Fisher's plaintive face turned to Barbara.

"What's all the fightin' for?" he asked.

Suddenly the combat stopped. Jeremy and Black got to their feet and circled each other. Their faces were deadly intent; their feet

moved in graceful patterns. Barbara Wells asked a short question—and deadliness went out of them.

"May I have this dance?" she asked.

The apartment rang with shouts of laughter. Involuntarily smiles twitched at Jeremy's and Black's mouths, and they made one or two futile passes at each other before they joined the general laughter.

They rocked back and forth on their heels. They gasped. They caught great, shuddering breaths, and tears came into their eyes. They had forgotten the cause of combat.

"That—was wonderful!" Jeremy cried brokenly.

"Yes," Black managed. "Thanks so much."

Dr. Barton interrupted. "Shall we continue?" he asked softly. His voice carried new assurance.

Jeremy sobered. An issue had been raised, and he had lost. Dr. Barton was to be one of them now—despite what he could do about it.

CHIEF GIMBEL did not relax in the dictator's guest chair. He held his great body on the edge of it with unconscious effort. His blocky face was gloomy, and its gloom was reflected in the dictator's countenance. It was ordinarily a merry collection of features resembling, to a certain extent, a peaceful cherub's.

"But what are they after?" Dictator Luke Williams asked with a touch of petulance.

Chief Gimbel sighed. "I don't know, Citizen Dictator," he confessed. "They say one word over and over. Revolution. I don't know what they're talking about, and my staff is beginning to get tired. Special meetings night after night. We've had no accidents, but we have to attend them."

"But I understand, Citizen Monitor, that they want to destroy the Light. Why—it can't be done. The code says so."

"I'm all mixed up," the chief complained.

They lapsed into silence, looked at, but without seeing, the furnishings of the great room. Here were telecreens directly connected to circuits in all parts of the world. On his respective screen, the resident commissioner of Kamchatka, Lhasa, Kansas City, Belgrade, or Buenos Aires could hold personal audience with the dictator and obtain an interpretation of a point of law, or pass the time of day. Here was the nerve

center of world government—on the screens which paneled the high walls.

"But didn't you tell them," the dictator pursued, "that they were violating the code?"

"I told them," Chief Gimbel replied dispiritedly, "but they told me to go chase a meteor. That girl did."

"But they say they're going to overthrow me," the dictator whined. "What would Mary say? I can't go home and tell her that I've been replaced without due process. They shouldn't want to do this to me. I never hurt them."

Chief Gimbel sighed again. "And I wonder what will become of me? I've been a monitor all my life, and so was my father before me."

"Then kill 'em all," said a new voice.

A young man came into the big room. He walked with quick, nervous steps. This nervousness extended to an eyebrow, which twitched spasmodically. His wide full mouth twisted when he talked. One thin white hand pulled occasionally at his ear or plowed through thick black hair.

"Kill 'em all," he repeated. "Hullo, Citizen Chief. Hullo, Uncle Luke. That's your answer. Simple, really." He sat on the dictator's desk and swung thin legs. They were almost as white as his shorts and tunic.

The dictator was shocked. "What are you saying, Richard?"

"Just that. Dog eat dog. They want to run you out—run them out first. Simple."

The dictator had been watching the young man's eyebrow with fascination. A look of annoyance overspread his cherub's face.

"I wish you wouldn't move that eyebrow, Richard. I get to watching it, and never hear anything you say. What was it, now?"

The dictator shut his eyes, and Richard Williams repeated his suggestion. "Take 'em to the top of the Light and heave 'em off. That'll teach 'em."

Richard Williams considered this, and before his uncle or the chief could reply, added, "Fun, too."

Chief Gimbel organized his thoughts. "But you can't. It's against the code. It's anti-social!"

"Ever see dogs fight?" Richard asked. "Corner one, he'll fight back. You're cornered. Fire with fire, then."

"Stop twitching that eyebrow!" his uncle begged. "How did dogs get into this?"

"Can't beat Nature," Richard said

obscurely. "She comes out on top every time."

The dictator opened his mouth, shut it, muttered, "What's Nature got to do with it?"

"Everything. The Light regiments aberrations. Dull dogs not affected. Makes brilliant people dull dogs. So, no progress, the world is static for two centuries. Nature waits; she pushes up a few like Jeremy Lawton. He sees what Light does. So do I—always did. Nature comes through again. I tell you, you can't beat her. Or maybe—" He halted, closed his eyes in concentration. "Damn! Never thought of that. This is serious. Damn! Got to stop 'em."

"What are you talking about?" demanded the chief.

"Just talking. You wouldn't understand. Got to stop 'em. Think I'll join 'em. Got a thought for 'em."

"Richard!" his uncle expostulated. "Please hold that eyebrow still and explain yourself."

"Look, Uncle Luke. I'll make you a proposition. If I lose out, and they take over, promise me something. Promise to take 'em up on the Light and throw 'em over. Ought to use guns—No guns any more, though. Oh well, an eight-hundred-foot dive is good enough. Promise, eh?"

"Even if I could understand," the dictator complained, "I couldn't do it. The code—"

"Code!" Richard snorted. He got off the desk, strode around with quick, jerky steps. "Code!" He walked in silence, his great eyes slitted with thought. He stopped suddenly, snapped his fingers. "Serve 'em right, though. Let 'em win, I think. Sure. What a joke!" He vented a dry cackle. "Joke on them, all right. Look, Uncle, I think I'll join the revolution."

"I don't know what a revolution is, even, Richard."

"Self-destruction," Richard said succinctly. "Fun."

"Suicide is against the code," Chief Gimbel said virtuously.

Richard smiled at him. In the smile were troubling overtones. Chief Gimbel shuddered, turned away.

"But why, Richard, why?"

"You wouldn't understand," Richard said crisply. "You don't know about dreams. Don't know how it is to live with dolts. I see what they're after. What a joke!"

CHAPTER III

"SMASH THE LIGHT!"

RICHARD WILLIAMS faced the group in Jeremy Lawton's apartment. "No converts, eh?" he said.

"No converts," Jeremy admitted dolefully. "The poor unfortunates couldn't understand what we were trying to explain. The shame of it! To degrade the highest intelligence in the animal kingdom in the name of reason."

"Can't blame 'em," Richard said. "For not knowing, I mean. All they ever knew was conformance—the code. Except us, of course." He chuckled, explained, "Joke. Not degraded, anyway. Didn't affect ordinary dolt. He's still the same. Just different conditioning. Well, what now? No revolution, so what now?"

"I don't know," Jeremy said gloomily. "According to history, you've got to get converts to a revolution. We tried. We went all over the world; we talked; we explained. And they laughed. They thought it was entertainment."

"Sure, sure," Richard said impatiently. He turned to Dr. Barton. "What about you, Citizen? You're the leader of the palace revolution. Lawton's down. What about you?"

"I fear," Dr. Barton said, "that I am equally without inspiration."

"Not me," Richard said. "Wanted to see, first, if you had ideas. No ideas. Well, here's one. Go up to Uncle Luke and tell him to go home. That's all. Nobody'll stop you. No guards. No need for 'em, because there's no guns any more. Just go up and say, 'Go home, old man, here's the new dictator!' Who is, by the way? Lawton? Dr. Barton?"

They absorbed the suggestion. As its simplicity struck home they began to chuckle. "Go tell Uncle Luke to go home. Go home, old man. Here's the new dictator."

Jeremy and Dr. Barton thought of this point at the same time. They eyed each other warily. Then Jeremy answered Richard Williams.

"We're equally divided," he said. "Four votes for me as the new dictator, four for Dr. Barton. I guess you have the deciding vote. Will you cast it for one of us?"

Richard smiled. "No need—yet. Think it over. Let you know later. I like being balance of power as long as possible. Let's go see Uncle Luke."

They did. The dictator complained, wrung his chubby hands a little.

"But why?" he asked timidly. "I'll go, but what can I tell Mary? She will be disappointed. She won't like it."

The dictator departed. The new regime looked at one another. Triumph, eagerness, uneasiness, mingled in their eyes.

Richard Williams stood apart in the big room. The only sound was his chuckling. They looked at him.

"Joke," he said.

THEN Richard Williams shot a slitted glance around the group, eyeing one after the other.

"Who's the dictator?" he inquired. "Fight it out. I'm not voting. I'm an onlooker. Always have been."

Tension mounted in the big room. Barbara moved to Jeremy's side. Rhodes Fisher and Ray Ford followed her, as if by command. Dr. Barton, Carl Blue, Harold Black, and Abdul Hamid aligned themselves in a group.

Jeremy and Dr. Barton stared steadily at each other. No move was made—yet.

Richard Williams seated himself in his uncle's chair, and the smile dissolved from his saturnine countenance. Ideas flitted through his mind, and he found some of them pleasant.

As an observer he was amused by the fact that a handful of persons had taken over government of the world. A polyglot group from several continents had simply moved in with no bloodshed—yet.

But as Richard Williams he felt an eager excitement. He was going to know; he was going to know! At last the opportunity had arrived to know the meaning of his dreams, his visions. Just outside the borders of his consciousness had lain a strange world, and now at last he was going to see that world.

True, it had remained for Jeremy Lawton to conceive the means whereby that world would be opened to him, with its phantasmal shapes, its *outré* population, its answers to his day and night dreams. He had stood on its borders for a long time, and now he was about to step out of this into the unknown. If only they would hurry; if only they did not reach a compromise. He cared little which faction triumphed. He could use Jeremy, who wished to smash the Light, or Dr. Barton, who wished to enslave the human race for his own purposes and was therefore evil from Jeremy's standard. Either faction was suitable for Richard's purpose.

Yet they stood quiescent, filled with hatred? No matter, they did nothing.

"Afraid?" he taunted. "Who's dictator? Dictators are strong—or their followers are. Who's strong here?"

They tensed further at this—but still no move was made.

"Lawton," Richard persisted. "Are you going to allow Dr. Barton to acquire a world-size stable of cattle to use as suits his fancy? Are you?"

"No, by heaven!" Jeremy said. "I warn you," he continued to Dr. Barton, "that you will not do this thing. I am going to be dictator, and I am going to destroy the Light."

"That," Dr. Barton said suavely, "we shall see."

"Talk, talk," Richard taunted. "Talk, talk."

Harold Black made a motion. It was not necessarily one of attack, but Jeremy interpreted it in that way. He launched himself in an arcing dive at the tall atomic-power man, and threw him to the floor. This acted as a signal for the others.

Carl Blue closed with Barbara, and soon had her helpless on the floor. Ray Ford jumped for Dr. Barton; Rhodes Fisher warded off Abdul Hamid with fat, futile hands.

Richard Williams watched the mêlée with an aloof smile. The growls, the snarls, the flailing blows, failed to arouse any emotion but amusement. The petty little fools, fighting for a non-existent advantage! He, Richard Williams, was already the real dictator—though not of this world. He had no wish to be dictator of this world. But that other world, just beyond his consciousness—now there was a world worthy of the name.

Let them wallow, let them kill each other. Someone would survive—and that one would be enough.

They did not kill each other. Harold Black relaxed his grip on Jeremy's throat when the latter slumped in unconsciousness. Dr. Barton kneed Ray Ford in the abdomen and had him down in a trice. Abdul Hamid made short work of Rhodes Fisher, and Carl Blue had begun to yawn, seated astride the entirely helpless girl.

The victors looked at each other. They smiled.

Dr. Barton, sleek, unruffled, eyed the vanquished quartet.

"Will you swear allegiance to me?" he asked. "I am dictator by right of might, and

if you swear I shall see that you are suitably rewarded. Otherwise, you may find circumstances most unpleasant."

They looked at Jeremy. He had regained consciousness, and his boyish face seemed to age as his square shoulders slumped.

"You've won, I guess. I've got to give in," he said slowly.

His supporters echoed his attitude—Rhodes Fisher without comprehension, Ray Ford because Barbara submitted.

"Then let's rest for today," Dr. Barton said. "We can meet tomorrow and decide how best to utilize the world for our own pleasure. Find your own quarters."

THEY broke up and drifted away. Jeremy and Barbara presently found themselves together on a roof garden, gazing down on the city. Across from them was the towering pillar of the Light.

"Look at it," Jeremy said bitterly. "Look at it. All those people down there, in this city and all over the world, and all these people up here in taxis and transports—they're slaves. Slaves to the Light, first of all, and now slaves to its keeper."

Barbara laid a hand on his arm. "Maybe we can find a way to destroy it?"

"How?" he barked. "Harold Black is the only one who knows how, and he's been with Barton from the first."

"We'll find a way," she said. "You and I."

He turned to look at her, at her yellow hair, her luminous eyes, her curved body and slim legs. He looked into her eyes and felt strange and nameless emotions stirring in his breast.

"I know it's against the code," he said, fumbling for words, "but I feel—"

"Yes?" she breathed. "Yes?"

"It's so hard to say. I've read books where the words were, but they didn't mean much to me then. They still don't. I don't know how to say it, but I'm—"

"Yes? What are you, Jeremy?"

"Sorry," said the voice of Richard Williams. "Don't like to break into a scene like this, but it made me uncomfortable. Got a proposition for you."

Jeremy whirled, eyed the newcomer with resentment. "What do you want?"

"Freedom, I guess," Richard said. "Haven't the courage to free myself, but thought you might. You want to destroy the Light?"

"Yes. Do you know how?"

"Sure, sure. Other things first, though. Got

a proposition. No—" he said, as Barbara started a courteous retreat—"don't go away. You're in it, too."

She came back. They waited for Richard to proceed.

"Let's sit down," he said. "Wall hides us. Dr. Barton might see, might wonder, might do something." They sat down. "Proposition involves returning Uncle Luke to the dictator's seat."

"But that's undoing all the good we've done!" Jeremy said.

"Good? Good? Done nothing, yet. Sent the old man home; made him sick with worry. That's no good. Done nothing more."

"But we've removed the dictator."

"Got to put him back. Got to kill Barton."

"Kill?" Jeremy faltered. "Kill Dr. Barton?"

"Sure, sure. Can't leave him alive. He'll ruin everything. Leave him to me. I'll take care of it. Don't mind that. It's a pleasure, really. You got to do the other, though. Haven't the courage, myself. Don't know why, but just haven't. Want to see it, but can't do it. Got to get Uncle Luke back first, though."

"But why? What's the idea behind it?"

"Won't tell, yet. You must promise first. Get back Uncle Luke—I'll kill Barton."

"I won't promise until I know why."

Richard Williams sighed, twitched his eyebrow. "Very well. Barton's mad—but not enough. Without the Light he'd be cunning, cruel. With it, just cunning. Bad for the race either way." He paused, shot a gleaming look at them in turn. "I'm mad, too. So are you—both of you. Hopelessly, without the Light."

They did not reply. The idea was too sudden. They needed time to understand.

Richard continued, "Why do we stand out? Why do we question? Easy. We're mad. The Light affects small strata. Those above normal; those short of physical madness. Have been only a few of these. I've studied more than you. I know. Twenty-nine years ago two hopelessly insane persons were put in an asylum—then they died. Remember how Light cured mental cases? Prevents 'em, too. But now a few got together on your inspiration. Therefore, you're mad. These others, too, except maybe Fisher. He doesn't belong."

"But take Dr. Barton—no initiative, but intelligence to use ideas. If Light's smashed while he's alive, he'll be mad. Not enough, though, to be locked up—just enough to

rule badly. He'll rule, too, and be a killer. See why Uncle Luke has to come back? He's sane."

JEREMY puzzled over this startling idea. Presently he believed that Richard Williams was correct. The only reason why he and these others rose above the normal was that their mental aberrations were strong enough to overcome, to some extent, the effect of the Light. That meant insanity, if the Light—

"But that means," he said slowly, "we'll be mad if the Light is smashed. We'll be insane."

"Sure, sure," Richard said cheerfully. "What did you expect?"

"Why, I expected to administrate a government that would allow men to live freely. Let them be genius, or idiot, or whatever they were endowed with by nature."

"Well?"

"I see I didn't think it through," Jeremy said ruefully. "I didn't see that I, and others like me, would let go of sanity once the Light was destroyed. I see it now."

"What'll you do about it?"

"I don't know," Jeremy said. "I don't know. I wonder what it's like to be mad?"

"Things," Richard said. "Beautiful, mad, savage, horrible—but not lonely. You been lonely?"

Jeremy smiled sourly. "I've been lonely." He looked at Barbara. And now, when it seemed I wasn't to be any more, this—" He broke off.

"How are the ideals now?" Richard asked. "Man freed from the Light. All that business."

"He still has the right," Jeremy said stoutly. "Look what this means. If a few of us push through its influence, there must be others, many of them, not so far. Without the Light they'd be brilliant. Why, the world ought to know a golden age of progress like nothing ever mentioned in history. But to smash the Light, knowing you'll be hopelessly insane the next instant—"

"Ideals not so good then, eh?"

Jeremy flushed. No, the ideals were not so good. He had been full of dreams—this was grim reality.

"What do you think, Barbara?" he asked.

She looked at him with frightened eyes. She grinned, but the fright still remained.

"You'd go down in history. You couldn't read it, of course, being in a mental hospital,

but you'd be a big man. Me, too, I suppose. I couldn't read it either."

She was silent for a moment. Then, "I'll tell you what," she proposed, "let's start saying to each other, without benefit of sanction, 'I love you, I love you, I love you.' Maybe we can form a habit pattern so that we'll continue saying it when we don't know what the words mean any longer."

"You think we ought to smash the Light, then?"

"What else?" she asked, beginning to cry a little.

CHAPTER IV

"MY SANITY FOR A WORLD'S"

JEREMY looked at Richard. "You've known about this for some time?"

"About what the Light did to people?"

"Sure, sure. For years."

"And you've wanted it smashed. You said so. Why didn't you smash it?"

Richard's mouth twisted; his eyebrow twitched. "No courage. Physical, that is. Courage to face it, eagerness, really—but not to do it. You, now, are no physical coward. You could smash it."

"But—madness. That makes everything different. Why should I sacrifice my sanity?"

"Barton," Richard said. "He's the reason. Hysteroid type. Even while the Light operates, he'd get rages. You've seen. With the Light gone, though, there'd be mass killings if he felt like it. Got to kill him and restore Uncle Luke."

"But—madness," Jeremy repeated.

Barbara's eyes were still frightened. "What would it be like? You seem to know everything," she said to Richard. "What would it actually be like?"

He frowned. "Hard to say, really. Twilight. I think. No blacks and whites. Grays. Weird, savage, beautiful. Both of you manic-depressive, I think. Don't know about that. I'm schizo. All I know is dreams—waking dreams. Much better than this. No orderliness. Exciting. Been only on the edges, though. Inside, must be wonderful. I want that—more than anything. This world is petty, unimportant, no reason for order, no movement. Plenty in mine—with the Light gone."

"Madness," Jeremy muttered again. "I—don't know if I want that."

Richard Williams eyed Jeremy. It was win or lose, now. Jeremy must smash the Light. He must! For Richard's world waited, just beyond the wall of consciousness, and the broken Light was a doorway through that wall.

The Devil's Domain—it had been called before the Light—a world of twisted shadows. But magnificent shadows—barbaric, terrifying, arousing a terrible desire. That elephant caravan in the valleys of a place he had named Shma. The golden trappings, the measured tread, the millions of slaves not clearly seen. He could see it, live in it—once the Light was no more.

Those excursions by night to great cities beyond space. His throne. Wars against the enemy who would usurp, destroy the splendor of those cities. Unbelievable gardenlands glimpsed darkly beyond translucent seas. Forgotten ivory towers, lovely and unbroken in moonlight.

His world awaited, and he was chained here amidst prosaic surroundings. Everywhere dull counterparts of dull men, buildings, planes.

Richard cared nothing for that everyday reality called science. Reality to most, it was to him a tortuous nightmare in which he moved while surging toward that world of wit, sensuous joy, and wild delight.

Yet he was under no illusions as to its meaning. By ordinary standards he was insane, held from the final limits of insanity by invisible emanations from a makeshift—the Light. It had been an answer, two hundred years ago. It had emptied mental hospitals, pushed men off creative heights, and trapped those endowed by nature to soar beyond those heights.

The irony was that nature would triumph in the end. A few had pushed through the barrier in this generation. In the next centuries there would be more, and some day the Light would be destroyed by accident or age—and the whole world would be filled with madmen.

He cared nothing for this. If the world were peopled with maniacs, it was all right with him. But here was a point of attack against Jeremy Lawton's natural fear of breaking the Light. For the young fool put ideals above everything. He symbolized the heroes of all time. Admirable, no doubt, but fools from Richard Williams' viewpoint—even though that viewpoint was twisted by aberration and therefore might be wrong.

Jeremy himself was beginning to realize the import of Richard's revelation. He and Barbara, and such others who had risen above the stultifying influence of the Light, would be plunged into that caveman's world of horror—insanity. He had read enough, heard enough, of the world before the Light to realize dimly, but to a frightening degree, what madness meant.

Barbara. He had come to her on a tele-screen, she to him on a transport plane. Out of all the millions, they had found each other. Was he to destroy what this could become for the sake of an ideal, a mistaken ideal at that?

Richard broke into his thoughts. "You can save all men, Lawton. Live forever. Immortalize your name."

"And what will that get me?" Jeremy asked bitterly. "Your realm of shadows."

"If the Light goes on," Richard continued, "all hell will break loose some day."

He went on to explain how nature would push more and more through the barrier with each generation until the day when the Light would be broken by accident, or design, or age, and then would come the consequent chaos. In his crisp, unfinished sentences he painted a picture of screaming men and cowering women. Maniacs loose on the Earth.

It affected, but did not convince Jeremy. He was a man, with the right to live out his natural span as best he could. He was no hero.

"I've got to think," he said. "I'll let you know tomorrow."

DR. BARTON was changed when the meeting was called on the following day. Even Rhodes Fisher could see it. Barton's expression made Fisher uneasy. True, the slim, middle-aged dictator was as sleek, as suave, as before. But the eyes had changed. They indicated smoldering emotions near the surface. They spoke of things to which Fisher could put no name, and from which he wanted to hide. He attempted to do so, by moving behind Barbara Wells.

But still the eyes seemed to seek him out, seemed to say, "I'm looking at you, Fisher."

"The first item on our agenda," Dr. Barton began in his soft voice, "will be consideration of a new palace. This building was good enough, no doubt, for the clods who in-

habited it before, but my taste runs more to splendor and height."

"Where will you get the money?" Jeremy asked.

Dr. Barton's eyes sparkled. "From the people! Please to be quiet." Dr. Barton took from his tunic a long, curved, gleaming blade. "Our museum had this on display. It will be my badge of office. It has other uses, Citizen Lawton, as you may learn."

"Rages," Barbara murmured. "Richard was right."

Dr. Barton turned his attention to her. "Please do not interrupt! My—ah, badge may be used on you."

Deep within Rhodes Fisher's fat and hitherto placid interior an emotion stirred. Atavistic, old as history itself, it aroused determination, anger, and the resolve to protect. To protect the woman, the mate, his heart had chosen.

"You leave her alone," he growled, and stepped from behind Barbara.

Dr. Barton's eyes took on a savage gleam of pleasure. He smiled. That was all it was—a smile. But Rhodes Fisher shuddered, shrank inside. Yet he stood his ground, fighting the desire to submit. His protective instinct was stronger than that for self-preservation.

Even when Dr. Barton moved toward him he continued to stand. His fat hands were half raised; his outthrust chin overshadowed the fright in his eyes.

"And what have we here?" Dr. Barton asked softly. "A dissenter? Surely we have no use for you."

The knife moved. It sliced Rhodes Fisher's fleshy throat. It was over before the act registered on the others. His life bubbled out in a scarlet, pulsing stream, and he fell, presently, with a look of wonder in his eyes.

Jeremy moved, noticing as he did so that all the others attacked.

Richard Williams watched. What had begun as a movement to relieve Dr. Barton of his weapon now became a killing charge. They growled; they mouthed incoherencies; they snarled like animals. With detached interest, Richard noted manifestations of derangements from simple neurasthenia to homicidal mania.

He saw Dr. Barton fight back—as the trite phraseology of the ancients put it—like a cornered rat. He saw the knife strike home in Abdul Hamid's stomach, saw that dark gentleman stagger out of the *mélée* and writhe on the slick, bright floor. He saw the

entire group attack as a single unit. He did not see Dr. Barton die.

Die he did, though his blood continued to flow for a little after they had reeled away. He died while buried under his attackers.

Then they looked at each other, the survivors. They looked at each other and then at the knife buried in Dr. Barton's throat. They dropped their eyes to the floor, made furtive attempts to wipe away spatters of blood from their clothes. They said nothing.

RICHARD went to the great door, opened it, called, "Come in, Uncle Luke. You can take over now."

The round, merry face, suffused with happiness, changed with shock to a mask of horror.

"What—what—" he sputtered, turning from the bloody floor to Richard.

"Never mind," Richard said. "No time now. Must hurry. You can mop up." He turned to Jeremy. "This is Uncle Luke. Look at him."

Jeremy looked at him. He began to see dimly what Richard meant. This man was sane. True, his characteristics inspired a sort of aloof contempt, but he and his kind were more fitted to run the world than Jeremy and his pack so thinly separated from psychopathia.

Light or no Light, here was the man.

"Come with me," Richard said.

Barbara fell in behind them, shaking still from the excess of powerful emotion.

Presently they arrived at the Light.

"Thought something like this would happen," Richard said. "Thought so. That's why I gave Barton that knife. Thought he'd show himself. See what I mean now—Light or no Light?"

"I see," Jeremy said. "I see, all right. I see something else, too. The Light keeps us from that sort of thing. If my kind is capable of that kind of action while the Light is operating, what will we be like if we smash it?"

"Madness, Citizen. Told you that."

"But there must be others! Those who didn't get in touch with me. They'll make the world a fearful shambles."

"Not many," Richard said. "Doubt it, really. We're the trials of nature. If we survive, she makes more. Ought to prevent that, really. Make no end of a mess. Well,

come inside the tower. Show you the gadget. Destroy the Light forever."

He showed Jeremy. He gave Jeremy the knife. One blow would do it. Richard bowed.

"Leave you two here. Give me ten minutes. Got a place I want to be. Near the Door . . . door into my world. Luck."

He went away.

Richard was right, Jeremy thought. Nature would triumph in the end. An obstacle had been thrown in her way, halting the forward march of evolution by reducing that narrow group of intellects responsible for progress to the level of the masses which it did not affect. So Nature went underground for two hundred years—to plan, develop, and wait. Now she sent up feelers, a few men and women like himself and Barbara, pushed them over the obstacle.

It seemed clear that as long as the Light endured, an increasing number of Nature's means of fighting that restriction would emerge, and soon the world would enter once again on its forward, progressive phase of movement.

As long as the Light endured.

But, as Richard had pointed out, these experiments were madmen—without the Light. If he, Jeremy, did not smash the Light's nerve center, and if others also left it inviolate, within a few generations the world should be filled with others who possessed initiative, brilliance, inventiveness. These would multiply in time, and then—and then if the Light were destroyed, every last one of Nature's successes would be plunged into madness.

"I don't want to do this," he groaned. "I don't want to face what comes next, for us. Well, we'd be together."

"Link hands, if you like, Jeremy."

"I must smash it, though. I must."

All the hardness went out of Barbara, all the protective exterior dissolved. She took his boyish face between tender hands. She cried a little.

"Kiss me, Jeremy."

He did so. It was a long caress, full of the things that might have been.

With a tremendous effort he wrenched away and struck with the knife at the Light of Reason.

Neither of them knew what happened after that.

THE END

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READER, I HATE YOU!

By HENRY KUTTNER

READER, I hate you.

I don't know what your name is—Joe or Mike or Forrest J—but I mean you, the little guy who buys all the magazines with Finlay pictures and Kuttner stories. The one who went into a bar somewhere a few months ago with a copy of *Astonishing* under his arm and ordered a Horse's Neck. The one, in particular, who met Mr. Upjohn and stole his wife, in the form of a chartreuse crystal.

I hope to high heaven you read this yarn. Mr. Finlay and I are making sure you do, insofar as we can. Why in hell did you take that crystal, anyhow? You should have known that Upjohn was tighter than an issue with an all-star lineup and a full quota of ads. It's all your fault. I hate you. If you don't give up your ill-gotten spoils, you'll never see another Finlay pic or Kuttner story as long as you live—God help us both. And if I could get my hands on you—

Didn't you know you were talking to a *superman*?

Anyhow, read this. Read about how you got us in trouble with Mr. Upjohn, of all people. You'll remember him, unless that Horse's Neck hit you too hard. A fat, bald guy with a button of a nose and mild blue eyes and platinum teeth. We met him in a bar, too.

IT was the Pen & Pencil, near Times Square. Finlay and I were discussing the future of science fiction.

"It stinks," I said.

"What it needs," he said, "are more artists like—"

"Yeah," I said, "and more writers like me."

"You," Finlay said, looking at me. "You—"

"So do you," I came back. "Let's have another Cuba Libre. The bubbles tickle my nose."

"You're thinking of champagne."

"I'm dreaming of champagne," I corrected. "My Uncle Rupert has a cellar full of the best. I hope he dies."

Finlay looked interested. "Will he leave the champagne to you? Is that why you hope he dies?"

"No," I said sadly. "I just don't like him. And I got a yarn to write by Saturday. Want to hear the plot?"

"I've heard it," Finlay growled, and investigated his Cuba Libre.

"Not this one."

"I have. Often." He licked his moustache reflectively. I twirled mine, hoping he'd notice. It's longer.

Then Mr. Upjohn came along and looked down at us. He was as I have described. You'll remember, you rat.

"Excuse me," he said, "but that bartender said you were connected with fantasy."

"How do you mean, 'connected'?" Finlay asked, rearing back. However, I believe in being polite to strangers, who often read magazines anyhow, so I said that we were.

"I know!" the button-nosed guy came back, quick as a flash. "Frank R. Paul and Leigh Brackett."

Finlay and I looked at each other. Then we had a drink together. He does not look at all like Frank Paul, who has a somewhat blunt-featured, happy-looking face. Finlay misses on both counts. Nor do I look like Leigh Brackett.

"Listen," I said, "Leigh Brackett isn't a—"

"Oh, don't apologize," he said in a friendly way. "I'm a superman myself."

"Why do these things have to happen, H.K.?" Finlay asked me.

"V.F., I just don't know," I said. "But they do. We'll have another round and maybe this superman will whiz off."

"No," said the superman, "I won't do that. Because you can help me. I'm trying to find two people—an artist and a writer."

"You mean a writer and an artist," I said, stung. "Who are they?"

"Virgil Finlay and Henry Kuttner," the superman explained.

Finlay choked on his drink.

"They're not real," he pointed out hastily.

"They're figments. Just pseudonyms, that's all."

"I don't believe that," he remarked.

"Okay," I said, "that's us. Now what's the gag?"

He brightened considerably. "Really? Oh, good, good! I'm Mr. Upjohn. That's not my name, of course, but when I'm on the outer crust of the Earth I assume a human title along with everything else."

"I know just how you feel," I told him sympathetically. "It's very, very seldom that I turn into bat in Times Square."

Mr. Upjohn signaled the waiter and ordered a boilermaker. "I'm in trouble," he said. "My wife has been stolen."

Finlay and I regarded each other.

"No," we said as one. "We didn't do it. We have wives."

"Where's your wife?" Finlay asked me as an afterthought.

"I don't know," I said, "but I think she went shopping with your wife."

He agreed morosely, "It's a feminine instinct."

I sighed. "Yes. While we sit here, sweating and slaving, working our fingers to the bone—"

"We could take in stairs to wash," Finlay suggested.

"No. There'd be splinters," I said tersely, and that ended the discussion.

Mr. Upjohn broke in. "Let me tell you about it," he pleaded. "If you don't, I'm apt to destroy you, and I really don't want to do that."

"Bah!" I said. "Am I a ninety-pound weakling?"

"Yes," Finlay said. "Go on, destroy him, Mr. Upjohn."

"I don't want to."

"I'll bet you can't," I jeered. "Nuts to you."

He pointed his index finger at my Cuba Libre.

It vanished, glass and all. . . .

"Sleight of hand," I said, crawling out from under the table and resuming my chair. "It means nothing. However, we'll listen to your story, purely out of courtesy. Bring back my drink while you're at it."

"I can't do that," Mr. Upjohn said, "but I can order another."

"Will you pay for it?" I demanded shrewdly.

"Yes," he said, and did. I began to like Mr. Upjohn.

"It was this way," he started. "I'm a superman, as I said. One of the few existing at the moment on Earth."

"There are others?" I asked.

"Sure. You've read *Odd John*?"

"Yes. Good writer, Stapledon."

"Well," said Mr. Upjohn, "then you know that mutations are born all the time. Some of them are supermen, specimens of the more highly evolved race that one day will people the world. I'm one such. We're born before our time, so we just hang around and wait for the rest of us to come along. We're immortal."

Finlay put his head in his hands.

Mr. Upjohn continued.

"We're marking time. We amuse ourselves. I built a spaceship, for example, in my cellar." He looked depressed. "That was a bit of a mistake. I couldn't get it out of the cellar."

"What did you do?" I asked, not really interested.

"Oh, I went down," he said. "A slight readjustment turned it into an earth-borer. This planet happens to be hollow, so I broke through the crust and came out in the inner world. A strange place. I visit it often."

"You do," Finlay said. "Oh, God."

Mr. Upjohn smiled, and I noticed that he had platinum teeth. He saw my glance. "Recapped 'em myself. My own teeth look quite inhuman and I didn't want to attract attention."

"I thought you said you changed your shape when you came to Earth," I said.

"Not my teeth, however. . . . Where was I? Oh, yes. There's a form of silicate life there resembling human beings. They grow differently, though—from crystals. Very lovely, the women. Especially the ones from chartreuse crystals."

"What's chartreuse?" I asked.

Finlay kindly explained that it was a pale green. Mr. Upjohn went on.

"Under the right radiations, the crystals bud and grow, much like human beings."

"Crystals?" I murmured.

"Originally. The basic genes and chromosomes are atomically arranged in a crystalline pattern. The human organism originally is little else, you know. And after the initial stage is passed the development would seem quite normal to you."

"I'm sure of it," I said hopelessly.

"So, anyway, I chose one of the prettiest of the crystals to be my wife. I invented a machine for forced growth, went down to the interior of the Earth, and got the crystal I'd picked. And brought it—her—back with

me. Then I celebrated. . . . I fear I celebrated too much."

"You mean you got drunk," Finlay said, anxious to clarify every detail.

"Yes," Mr. Upjohn said, "I got drunk." He sounded sad. "I went into a bar somewhere—"

"Around here?"

"I don't know. I get around fast—teleportation. It might have been San Francisco or Detroit or Rochester. I haven't the slightest idea. Yes," Mr. Upjohn finished, "I was drunk. Liquor affects supermen a lot, somehow."

"Not only supermen," I said, having another.

"So I went into this bar and ran into a little guy who kept ordering Horse's Necks. I got acquainted with him. We talked. He had a magazine under his arm, and talked about that."

"What did he look like?" Finlay asked.

Mr. Upjohn shook his head. "I haven't the slightest idea. His face was a blur. Oh, I was drunk! *Tsk!* I let drop the fact that I was a superman, and he just laughed. Said there was no such thing. I picked up his magazine and said I could show him far more fantastic things than it had in it."

"And could you?" I inquired.

"I wonder," Mr. Upjohn muttered. "I said so, anyhow. I told him about the last time I took my ship to the interior of the Earth and one of the giants picked it up."

"Giants?"

"Yes. There are a lot of them down there. They have horns and pointed ears. Anthropoid, rather, but not very intelligent. Savages, living in nomadic tribes. Anyhow, as I say, this yellow one picked up my spaceship like a toy, and I had to climb out and burn his nose with my raygun before he let go. I told this—ah—fan about that. He didn't believe it."

"Oh?" Finlay said.

Mr. Upjohn sighed. "He said it was old stuff. And he showed me his magazine—it was called *Astonishing*, I remember. There was a girl on the cover with a lot of jewels floating around her—you painted it, Mr. Finlay—and it illustrated a story called *The Crystal Circe*."

"Me," I said excitedly. "Me. I wrote it. How'd you like it?"

"Oh, I didn't read it," Mr. Upjohn said. "I prefer realism myself. But this fan said he always bought magazines with Finlay

pictures or Kuttner stories. Which, of course, is why—"

THE waiter brought another round. Presently our guest continued.

"I'm ashamed to admit how tight I was, but I do recall telling the fan over and over about my adventure with the giant. And finally I showed him the chartreuse crystal—my wife. And—" Mr. Upjohn blushed—"I—ah—I gave it to him."

"Why?" Finlay asked.

"I was drunk," the superman said simply.

"Well," I said, "I gather you want your wife back before she hatches."

"She won't hatch—without the right radiations. The worst of it is I don't remember where I met this fan or what his name is. Joe or Mike or Forrest J—something like that. I can't recall. But he *did* have a copy of *Astonishing*, and he is a Finlay and Kuttner fan."

"Obviously a man of intelligence," Finlay and Kuttner said as one.

"I want my wife back," Mr. Upjohn remarked.

I looked at the platinum teeth. "That shouldn't be very hard. You're a superman."

"I'm not that super. We have our limitations. Now here's the idea, gentlemen. I've got to get in touch with that fan and ask him to return my wife—the chartreuse crystal. I've only one means of contact with him. You two, and the magazine."

"I don't get it," I said.

"It's simple enough. Mr. Kuttner, I'd like you to write this episode exactly as it's happened. Mr. Finlay, I'd like you to illustrate the scene I've described. The fan, attracted by the picture, will buy the copy of *Astonishing* inevitably, and having read the circumstances, will return the crystal to me in care of the editor."

"Look," Finlay said, "I don't work that way. A giant clutching a spaceship—ha! There's no cover material in that."

"It's a *big* giant," Mr. Upjohn said.

"No. Besides, how do I know what's it's supposed to look like?"

"Big, with horns and large pointed ears. All iridescent yellow, you know."

"It won't do," I broke in. "Stories aren't written like that, and if they were, they wouldn't sell. Suppose I did what you suggested and simply recorded this incident as it happened? Do you know the editor of *Astonishing*?"

"No," Mr. Upjohn murmured.

"I do," I said simply.

The superman looked at us in a depressed fashion.

"It happened, you know," he said. "The giant grabbed my ship, and I crawled out and burned his nose till he dropped it."

"The nose?" Finlay asked stupidly.

"The ship."

"Weren't you hurt?"

"I'm indestructible," Mr. Upjohn said. "Different atomic structure."

"In any case, no," I said. "You should know better than to ask us—"

"But I *am* asking you. And I have the power to back up my demands. With a very slight expenditure of vital energy I could reduce you both to pinches of grayish ash."

"Oh, have a drink," Finlay said, getting disgusted. Mr. Upjohn complied. The liquor seemed to hit him at once.

"Shoop—supermen react quickly to alcohol," he explained, blinking at us. "Too bad. But it wears off in a hurry."

"No hangover?" I inquired.

"No," he said. "I'm a sh—superman."

"Anyhow," I said, "we can't help you. Stories aren't written like this—saleable ones at least. You got to have a plot."

"No," Mr. Upjohn decided. "That would spoil it. All I want is for you to write down what happened."

"Like Saroyan," I said. "No, my good man, I can't. I must preserve the artistic unities. Besides, I couldn't get a check for the yarn."

Finlay was lapping at his Cuba Libre. "Same way about the illustration. A picture has to illustrate a scene in the story. I don't see any yellow giants playing with space-ships."

"Nobody would believe it," I said. "Even as fiction. You might as well say that, by a pure, raw coincidence, the guy in the next booth is the one who swiped your wife."

Finlay rose and peered into the next booth. "No," he told us. "No, there's only a little guy here drinking a Horse's Neck and playing with a marble or something." He sat down again.

We did a double-take.

"A marble?" I said. "What color?"

"Omigod," Finlay cried in a heartfelt manner. "Chartreuse!"

WE stared at Mr. Upjohn, who returned our gaze in an owlish and distracted fashion.

"Sall a lie," he muttered. "There is no

Earth. You get my crystal or I'll destroy you both. Wife-stealers, thass what. *Urpl!*" He slid forward gently and lay with his face on the table. It proved impossible to rouse our drunken superman.

"Well, maybe it isn't a *raw* coincidence," Finlay said.

"If it's the same guy—"

"Mr. Upjohn might have subconsciously come back to the same bar where he first met him."

"Yeah," we said, and pondered. After a while Finlay broke the silence.

"I wonder what did happen?"

"Our friend Upjohn is an alley peddler, maybe. He ran into this little guy and offered him an emerald cut-rate because it was hot. An old gag. Down on East Fifth, in Los Angeles, they used to sell diamonds that had been smuggled in from Tia Juana. They were fakes, naturally."

"Then why does Mr. Upjohn want it back?"

"It'd take Dash Hamnett to figure that one out," I said, having another drink. "This is how murders always start—by chance encounters in bars. When we leave, we'll probably run into a corpse weltering in its own gore."

Finlay eyed me intently. "Weltering?"

I made helpless gestures, not feeling up to explaining it. "Oh—weltering. Sort of floundering. What the hell does it matter, anyhow? We're talking about this hunk of green ice."

"It wasn't an emerald. I could tell."

"Was there a blonde babe in it?" I inquired, growing ironic. "Are you starting to fall for Mr. Upjohn's yarn?"

"The superman?" Finlay laughed. "Let's wake him up. If he wants that chartreuse crystal back, it's right here in the next booth."

"Perhaps," I hedged. "Don't count on it."

"Think Mr. Upjohn made up the whole story?"

"I dunno. Let's ask him. *In vino veritas*. That is Latin."

Finlay grunted skeptically. He leaned toward Mr. Upjohn and shouted in his ear—feeling, as he afterwards said, like Humpty-Dumpty addressing his messenger.

"About that giant—"

"It has green eyes," said Mr. Upjohn, startled. "Don't forget, two little piles of grayish ash. I can do it, too." He instantly fell asleep again.

"Ha," Finlay said. "A yellow giant with

green eyes. Against a lavender background, I suppose. Well? What'll we do with Mr. Upjohn?"

"We could put him in a teapot," I said, "if we had a teapot."

Mr. Upjohn did not, apparently, waken, but his voice said quietly, "I'll take steps to make sure you do what I want. I'll put a hypnotic compulsion on you both. Neither of you will be able to do a lick of work till you've fulfilled my commission."

"Delirious," I said briefly. "Let's go see the guy in the next booth."

Finlay rose and peered. "He's gone."

"I'll trail him," I said, hastily heading toward the door. "Take care of the check and follow me."

"We'll let Mr. Upjohn do that," Finlay suggested, keeping pace with me. "Where's our quarry? He couldn't have gone far."

HE hadn't. We saw the little man getting into a taxicab at the curb. We heard him say, "Grand Central Station."

"Well—" I said indecisively.

"Why not?" Finlay asked me. We were both intrigued, I guess. At any rate, we felt like asking the little guy a question or two. So we piled into another taxi.

"Grand Central," I said.

It was late afternoon. Snow was starting to come down. We cut along 42nd, Times Square on our left, dimmed out as usual, and turned into the taxi dock by Grand Central. Our quarry was disappearing into the station. We ran after him. He headed for the Oyster Bar with the air of a man lusting for oysters, but stopped to glance at his watch. Then he scurried to a row of lockers, fumbled out a key, and extricated a couple of small suitcases. By that time we were beside him.

"Hey," I said. "We want to talk to you."

He looked frightened. "Sorry. My train's leaving."

Finlay seized one arm, I got the other.

"This'll only take a minute," Finlay said. "Don't yell for a redcap. We want to know where you got that chartrreuse crystal you were playing with in the Pen & Pencil?"

"Is it stolen?" he asked, wide-eyed. "The man who gave it to me—"

"Mr. Upjohn?"

"Yes, that was his name. Are you detectives? I—I'm in New York on business, just for a few days. And I really must get back home. My train—"

"The crystal," I said.

He tried to pull free. "My train's pulling out! Gentlemen, if the jewel's stolen I—"

"No," Finlay said, "it isn't stolen. We want to ask you some questions, that's all."

The little man fished something out of his vest pocket and thrust it into my palm. Instinctively I clutched it. It was warm and velvety, large as a big plum, and seemed to vibrate gently.

"Keep it!" the little guy said. "It's enchanted anyway." Then he pulled free and fled, his suitcases jouncing as he scuttled off.

Finlay and I looked after him and then turned to examine what I held in my palm. It was the chartrreuse crystal, all right. It felt funny as hell.

My hand tingled.

"Here," I said hastily. "You try it." I handed it to Finlay—and the crystal jumped away from us. It didn't fall. It jumped.

It landed on the floor, and we dived for it. The crystal slid away. It drifted off like water, or like a mouse flitting off to its hole. My stomach tried to jam itself into my sinuses.

That damn crystal ran away from us through Grand Central Station.

The station was crowded, as usual, and

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we were handicapped. We ran after it, jostling our way. I got an umbrella rib in my ear, and Finlay ran full tilt into a fat man with a derby hat and sent them both flying. Meantime the crystal skittered around toward the Oyster Bar, flowed down a ramp and glided toward one of the train gates.

So the little guy had said it was enchanted, eh? He was right!

It went through the gate. We went after it, ignoring a Brooklyn accent that demanded our tickets. We raced along the platform. A train was pulling out into the long tunnel.

The chartreuse crystal stopped, a dim splash of yellow-green light on the dingy gray pavement. I hurdled a hand truck and grabbed at it. The crystal bounced off my nose and sailed after the train.

It tried three windows before it found an open one. Then it went in. And vanished.

Finlay was sitting on the baggage truck, looking as stupefied as I felt. He got up as I approached, and we went back to the gate. The guy who tended it was taking down a sign that said CHICAGO.

"Maybe he's getting off at Rochester."

"If we knew his name—"

"Maybe we could wire ahead—"

"We're not detectives," Finlay said. "We haven't any authority to pull a man off a train. Uh-uh. Let's go find—ah—Mr. Upjohn."

I could think of nothing better to do. So we returned to the Pen & Pencil.

Mr. Upjohn was gone.

We sat down at our table and had another drink.

"It never happened," I said hopefully.

Finlay pointed to the tabletop. Etched there, in letters that shimmered like fire, were words.

Don't forget what I want. I'll make sure the work is published. Remember, two little piles of gray ash.

It was unsigned.

Presently the sentences faded out and vanished.

We had another drink. But we didn't feel it.

AN hour later we broke it up. Finlay had a picture to do, I had a deadline to meet. I went home, slipped a sheet of paper into my typewriter and started.

I typed: *Reader, I hate you.*

Which wasn't what I'd intended to say at all. I tried another sheet. And I typed the same thing.

I kept on doing it. That was all I could write, apparently. Post-hypnotic suggestion or something. But a superman—

No, I didn't believe it.

After a while I telephoned Finlay. "Hi," I said.

"Hi."

"My wife got a new hat."

"So did mine," he said. "What are you working on now?"

"Oh, a story. Just—a story. And you?"

"A picture."

"What—"

"A picture of a giant holding a spaceship," he told me. "Well? Can I guess what you're writing?"

"Yeah," I said. "You can guess. It's all I can write."

"And this is all I can draw," he said. "Do you suppose—"

"It's hypnosis, that's all. It's not impossible. We can get around it somehow or other."

"Sure we can," he said without conviction, and hung up.

A week later neither of us had got around it. My wastebasket was littered with crumpled sheets starting, *Reader, I hate you. I don't know what your name is—Joe or Mike or Forrest I—*

And Finlay said his wastebasket was in a similar condition, jammed with unfinished roughs of giants.

That's the way it was. Mr. Upjohn couldn't do this to us. But he kept on doing it.

We went up to see the editor of *Astonishing*. He listened, and looked at us in a marked manner.

"You don't believe us," we said.

"No," he said. "Not really."

"And you wouldn't buy the story or the picture?"

He looked at us again, broodingly. We went away.

"Editors," I said in the elevator, "have no imagination."

"It wasn't much to ask," Finlay said plaintively. "He might have tried to believe us. All I can sketch is that damn yellow giant with green eyes."

"And all I can write—"

"Maybe if we do what Mr. Upjohn wanted," Finlay suggested, "the hypnosis would wear off."

I said it was an idea, anyhow.

So we went home and got busy.

Halfway through the story my phone rang. It was the editor of *Astonishing*.

"Hey, Kuttner," he said. "I'm in a spot. I need a story in a hurry. Can you—"

"Certainly," I said, automatically. "I just yesterday thought of the greatest damn—"

Then I remembered. "Sorry," I said. "You know how it is with me. That story I'm working on—I have to finish it."

"That's the one I mean," he said. "Listen. I'll tell you what I'll do—I'm going to put it in the very next issue. *Super Science*, that is. It hits the stands before *Astonishing*."

"I'll finish it up right away," I promised. "Friday. Do you think you can read it soon?"

"Read it!" His voice cracked. "Kuttner, I won't read *anything* till I read that story!"

And he hung up. I chased over to see Finlay.

He was putting the finishing strokes on a picture of a giant holding a spaceship, beaming.

"You got a phone call," I said.

"Yeah. He wanted a cover in a hurry. This cover. . . ."

We remembered the message on the table-top—Mr. Upjohn's cryptic remark that he'd make sure our work was published.

"Do you suppose Mr. Upjohn visited—"

I didn't finish. Too many strange things were going on. I'm a professional writer, not Faust. But I was beginning to feel like the Sorcerer's Apprentice.

But—well, there it is. This isn't orthodox. A cover picture always illustrates a scene in a story; it's got to. And a story has to have a plot. Don't ask me how this yarn and this cover ever got published. Ask Mr. Upjohn. He gets around. I've a hunch he got around to the editor.

NOW look—Joe or Mike or Forrest J or whoever you are. Get in touch with the editor. You buy this magazine, and this month it has a Finlay picture and a Kuttner story, so you'll be triply certain to buy it. After you've read this, you'll know the low-down.

The chartreuse crystal seemed to like you. It found its way back into your pocket, I expect. But it isn't yours. That's Mr. Upjohn's wife you're carrying around in your vest!

Mr. Upjohn is a superhero. He's put the

bee on us. It's worse than I'd thought, too. Unless you write Mr. Upjohn, care of the editor, Finlay and I will be in a spot. Two little piles of grayish ash. . . .

But, as I say, it's much worse than we'd imagined. After finishing the cover picture, Finlay telephoned me.

"Look," he said, "I painted in the eyes last night—gave it the final touch. It's all done. I did what Upjohn wanted."

"I'll be through with the yarn tonight," I said.

"Let me know what happens."

"Why?"

His voice was bitter. "Because I started another picture. Because I tried to rough in a girl's figure against a starry background, and I couldn't do it. All I could sketch was a giant holding a spaceship."

"Again?"

"Yeah. Mr. Upjohn forgot to limit his hypnotism. I can't draw anything but that popeyed giant. Do I have to spend the rest of my life drawing that?"

"It's crazy," I said.

Finlay sucked in his breath. "You'll find out. Wait'll you try to write another story. You won't be able to do it. Listen, put in a note to the little guy with the crystal. When he gets in touch with Mr. Upjohn, tell him to be sure to mention our fix. We did what Mr. Upjohn wanted. So have the little guy tell his superhero to *lift* that hypnotic spell he put on us."

You got that?

Personally, I think Finlay's wrong. When I finish this yarn, I'm going to start another. And it won't begin, *Reader*, I hate you.

Well, that wraps it up. I'm through. Give Mr. Upjohn back his wife, and all will be forgiven. If you don't—

But you will. Eh?

Okay—that's all. Explicit. Thirty. The End. I'll put this sheet out of my typewriter and get started on a yarn about a survivor from Lemuria who finds himself in a modern world. . . .

READER, I hate you.

I don't know what your name is—Joe or Mike or Forrest J—but I refer to the little guy who—

HEY!

THE END

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Dear Sir,

After smoking 60 cigarettes a day, I am pleased to inform you that I have not smoked since receiving my APAL.

W.B., Clapham, S.W.A.

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New Day on Aurora

By STUART FLEMING

THE men had come out of the ship, under the strangely harsh glare of alien stars in an airless sky, and crossed to where the battered monolith stood—tiny, crawling mites, raising swift-settling clouds of dust among the crags of the desolate planet.

The monolith was a stark, severe finger of vitreous plastic that pointed forlornly toward the stars from the middle of a seared, denuded plain. Here there had once been soil, and growing things, perhaps; now there was only naked rock, ravaged and lifeless. Beyond were mountains, and at their foot a deep, tortuous chasm that had been a river.

Thick and grotesque in their enfolding spacesuits, the men milled antlike about an opening at the column's base. For a time they seemed to argue, and then, one by one, they filed through the opening and disappeared into caverns below. When they came out, they bore on their shoulders great coffers of shining metal, heavy even under the slight gravity of this world. By Herculean efforts they carried them over the tumbled rocks to their ship, and disappeared inside with them.

Then the ship lifted itself upon a tumultuous, bright pencil of fire and was gone, leaving the planet once more lifeless and deserted. The monolith still pointed mutely to the sky, and below it the doorway still gaped invitingly.

THE dead planet swam down toward Steve Kourmas in the visiplat. He watched it intently, handling the submerged keyboard by feel. Behind him the rest of the *Viking's* crew, cushioned in their hydraulic deceleration chambers, were quiet waiting. Only an occasional cough or grunt broke the silence, or a muttered curse as the pressure drove them deeper into the supporting liquid.

This was the place. The Earth ship *Orion* had left for this dead world seven years ago—and had not come back. Nor had it been reported from any inhabited planet in the Galaxy. They had come here; almost certainly they had reached this planet. The *Orion* was proof against any known danger in flight and her crew were seasoned spacemen. Her captain—

Strange to think of wiry, brilliant, white-bearded Anton Kourmas as—dead. He was almost a legend: he had been with the *Polaris* expedition when Steve was seven. He had come back, that time. Steve remembered his own wide-eyed attention as his father's dry, humorous voice told him, "Spacemen are the life of the race, son. They never die, any more than the race dies." But it had been seven years now. They couldn't still be alive.

Then why had he come? Why had he worked and fought his way to the captaincy of this ship, the one he knew would be sent to search for the *Orion*? Why was it that hope for someone you loved stayed alive even when you knew that someone must be dead?

Maybe it was something else Anton Kourmas had said: "Earthmen don't give up Steve. Do you know why the Polarians died and we came back? They were intelligent, perhaps more intelligent than we'll ever know; they knew they were licked, and they gave up. Well, we knew we were licked, too, but we kept on trying."

The wrinkled, keen face with its hypnotic eyes receded, and the visiplat came back. The planet was nearer. There was the monolith again, incongruous in the desiccated waste around it.

Over the muted thunder of the rockets he heard young Kane, recumbent in the tank beside him, speaking into a microphone suspended over his head, recording a running account of the landing.

"Three kilometers up. The monolith is visible again; we are maneuvering to land near it on the assumption that the *Orion* would have done so. No sign of the *Orion*, however. The monolith stands in the center of a large plateau with high mountains to the west and south. It is the only artificial structure visible from space on the entire planet.

"Twenty-five hundred meters. Still celebrating; nothing has happened to us yet. I'll keep on recording at random, in order to establish the exact moment of disaster, if any. 'There once was a young man named Case, who knocked holes in his ship with a mace. Said he as he died, I submit, sirs, with pride: I have proved you can't breathe out in space!' . . .

"Uh—Alderamin, Cepheus 20X3972, was first mapped in 2092 by Elder and Mauret. Its planetary system consists of three bodies of twenty-nine, fifty-five, and one hundred and two kilometers diameter respectively. Of these the outermost, Alderamin Three, appears to be suitable for reclamation by atmosphere plants and atomic converters and has therefore been incorporated into the *Outline of Colonization*."

"Two kilometers up. Uh—'Colonization. An expedition sent to make preliminary surveys; however, the *Orion*, captained by Anton Kourmas, failed to return and is assumed to have perished.' That's from the *Reports of the Sol Union Astronautical Society* for August, 3004. From here Alderamin Three doesn't look suitable for reclamation by anything, but that's only your reporter's opinion. Funny thing—I just happened to think: here I am straining myself to be funny, and if anybody ever plays this back I'll probably be dead.

"Fifteen hundred meters. . . ."

CUSHIONED on its under-jets, the *Viking* sank slowly to rest amid a chaos of vaporized and incandescent rock. Steve watched the danger lights on the board before him and gathered a long breath.

"Well, we made it," said Kane jauntily, and added thoughtfully, "So far." There was a rustle of movement as the men behind them rose from the tanks and detached themselves from their watertight harnesses.

Silently Steve unzipped the membrane from his tank and hoisted his big body out of it. The rest were all out of their tanks and standing for orders: Johnston, second

astrogator-pilot; Helmers, engineer; Vanzetti, second engineer; Curtis, gunner; Chung, physician and telepathist; MacDowall, archeologist.

MacDowall was expostulating heatedly with Chung, who was the only one patient enough to listen to him.

"It is all so wasteful! Bang, bang, with the rockets, and up go hundreds of cubic meters of rock; volatilized, destroyed. What if there had been remains buried under that spot? What if we had happened to land on a record block set up by the first expedition? *Phht*—another mystery of space!"

"Impossible, that last," Chung said mildly. "We scanned the place carefully before landing on it, in case of just such a one—"

"Don't quibble. Don't quibble. Look at this trip itself—two years wasted in a tank of ice each way. There is no necessity for it: Terra and Alderamin Three are as close as *that*—" he pressed his bony forefinger and thumb together—"in hyperspace. What are our astrophysicists thinking of? Mauret drive—limited contra-inertia!" He started to spit, then thought better of it.

Steve grinned faintly. "Save it, Mac. Stations, gentlemen. Volunteers for a survey in full armor."

Kane and MacDowall stepped forward at once. "Right, you two. The rest—"

Unexpectedly, black-bearded Helmers stepped forward, extinguishing his newly-lit pipe against the heel of his hand.

"Doesn't look like much of a planet," he rumbled. "May I go along?"

Steve hesitated. "Easy, Ivan. What would we do if we should lose you?"

"Vanzetti could take my place, or you, or even Chung, if he had to. Nobody's indispensable. Call for a vote."

Steve shrugged ruefully and acceded. "Get into your armor then. You three will place the record block we prepared before landing; then look over the terrain, keep an eye out for the *Orion*'s block, and approach that obelisk, one man at a time. Get all the information you can about it from a prudent distance, and then come back."

MacDowall, struggling to get his attenuated frame into armor, looked up with a start. "But—but I want to examine that obelisk. Why the devil do you suppose I asked to go?" he cried.

"You'll have your chance." Steve's jaw knotted abruptly. "But whatever happened to the *Orion* isn't going to happen to us, if I can prevent it. They didn't suspect any-

thing, and they undoubtedly sallied out immediately and examined that thing at close range. It's one of the few things we can be certain they did do. And that's why you're not going to do it—not yet anyway.”

The other wilted. “Oh, very well,” he muttered feebly. Then he patted the triangulating spy-ray in his kit and brightened.

The three men, grotesque in lead-coated armor, burdened with sidearms and equipment, shuffled out through the airlock. In a few moments they appeared from under the bulge of the ship, climbed the pit made by the landing, and struck off over the jagged rock toward the monolith.

Frowning, Steve watched them through the visplate. The leading figure, Kane, bounded cheerfully along, climbing pinnacles of rock to get a better view and then leaping down again. Next came the short, bulky mass that was Helmars, pursuing a stolid course directly toward his goal; and lagging behind was MacDowall, tall and stooped even in his armor. At intervals he stooped to pick up a fragment of rock and then cast it aside. Once he even squatted over an excrescence of igneous matter and took out his pickaxe.

“Mac!” Steve called sharply. “Keep up with the rest. You can dig for bones later.”

MacDowall cast an injured glance over his shoulder and then hurried to catch up. After that the three kept fairly close together—until they had covered half the distance to the monolith.

Then there was an exclamation in the loudspeaker and Kane's tiny figure went soaring off at a tangent. The other two followed more slowly.

“What is it, Kane?”

A moment's silence, and then: “I've found the *Orion's* record block. Wait a minute. . . .

“It gives the date of landing, Sol. 29,3001, but that's all. No exploration data, and no departure date!”

Steve breathed heavily, but said nothing.

Young Kane's worried voice came back after a pause. “What do you make of it, Steve? Their ship is gone, but they didn't leave a record. What could have made them leave without posting the block?”

STEVE ran his fingers through his short hair and picked up the spy-ray film for the hundredth time. “There's a chamber hollowed out underneath it,” he said bitterly. “That could account for a lot. Mac, I'm sending those men to their deaths.”

MacDowall peered over his shoulder, cracking his knuckles nervously. “I wanted to go,” he said petulantly. “It would be worth the risk, well worth it, just to see what's inside that crypt.”

“Everybody wanted to go.”

MacDowall grunted disconsolately. “More waste. It's inexcusable, drawing straws for things like this. We ought to have a card file, indexed with each man's capabilities, and a mechanical sorter. One would think we were still living in the Age of Chaos.”

In the visplate the three figures were just climbing the last ridge before the monolith.

Chung's voice said, “Here we go, Steve. We drew lots among ourselves for precedence. I go first, then Johnston, then Ivan.”

They filed down into the monolith's shadow.

“I'm blasting in the door,” said Chung. “There's a lever which apparently opens it, but we're not taking any chances. I will keep talking until something happens to me, and then Johnny and Ivan will tell you what it was, if they can.”

“Luck, Chung!” Steve said huskily.

“The door is open. It sank into a slot; I only burned it a little at the edge. . . . There's a ramp leading down. It curves at about twenty meters; the others will have to follow me closely at that point.

“I'm going down. . . . Here's the bend. I can see into the cavern a little, but my flash does not light it up much from here. I can't make out anything. Ready, Johnny?”

“Ready.”

“This is it. I'm going through the doorway. It's high, about five meters. The race that built this must have been tall—Uhh!”

Johnston's drawl broke in: “Chung staggered as soon as he got through the door.”

“Stay where you are,” Steve snapped. “Chung, are you all right?”

“All right,” Chung answered slowly. “Something hit me when I stepped over the threshold. Not material—a force-field of some kind, I think. But I'm all right; I feel fine.”

“Did you see anything, Johnston?”

“No, Steve. He just lurched suddenly.”

“You, Ivan?”

“No.”

“Where are you?”

“Just outside the doorway. Shall we go in?”

"Not yet. Watch Chung; report anything unusual."

"I'm perfectly all right, Steve. It wasn't a strong enough field to do anything. It didn't even knock me off my feet. Perhaps it was originally intended as a trap, although I doubt it; but if it was, the power supply has run down."

"What do you see?"

"Not much. . . There's machinery around the walls, but it's all enclosed and I can't dismantle it alone. There is a passage leading out of the far end. Shall I explore it?"

"No. Wait a minute. . . All right, explore it. Might as well get it over now. Johnston, follow him in, but stay where Ivan can see you. And be careful!"

"I'm going in," Johnston announced. "Chung—whup!"

"Johnny staggered, too," said Helmars.

"How do you feel, Johnston?"

"I'm—all right. It was nothing."

"You sound queer," Steve barked. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"No, honestly, Steve. It was just Chung said, just a mild shock."

"Jets on. Just my nerves, I guess. Go ahead; where's Chung?"

"I'M in the next chamber," Chung said.

He formed the words carefully, striving with a tense desperation to betray no hint of the surging emotions that leaped within him. "There are more machines here, all totally unfamiliar. There's dust on the floor. It's been disturbed."

The machines were not unfamiliar. Chung knew with an age-old certainty every detail of their construction, every phase of their functions. It was as if he himself had builded them, he himself thought and planned across the dusty millenia for this day. Out of the confusion of his former life, the certainty of this place was like a bright, joyful flame, searing away all of his doubts and questionings.

The voice came back, as though from far away. "Human footprints?"

He must be careful. "I can't tell for certain. I think so. They lead into another passage. Orders?"

"Oh, damn," Steve groaned. "Go ahead, all three of you, keeping each other in sight. Ivan, report your sensations immediately when the field hits you."

. . . It was done. Chung let a little of the exultation in his mind seep through into Johnston's. In another instant Ivan, too, would know and be one of them.

That had been incautious. He realized it in a moment of black, feral panic, as he felt an uncertain fear in Ivan's mind and heard his worried voice in the helmet phones.

"Just a minute. I caught a mental impression from somebody just then; it felt like Chung. Some strong emotion, not in Chung's normal pattern at all."

There was a silence from Steve, a silence more dangerous than any sharp demand.

His mind tightly screened, Chung fought to relax the tight clutch of fear at his throat, to think swiftly, lucidly, as he had never thought before. For a moment his mind whirled kaleidoscopically. What if he should fail now, on the very brink of triumph? Gods of his ancestors! What would be left for him in life if he should fail? Would he die? No—but some essential thing would be gone out of him. He saw his future before him, the endless searching of a man dead in his soul for something which did not exist, and now could never exist again.

And then, with a sudden clearness, he knew what he must say. The whirling thoughts had occupied only an instant; there was still time.

"I felt it, too, Steve. It came from somewhere near—ahead of me, I think. And, Steve—it was a terrestrial thought!"

He waited, breathless.

"Terrestrial—" Steve's voice was trembling with emotion. "Go ahead, all of you."

His mind tightly shielded, Chung smiled.

"Very well," growled Ivan. "Here I go."

There was a silence.

"Well?"

"A nothing," Ivan said. "I hardly felt it."

Quickly, in response to Chung's mental call, Ivan and Johnston joined him in the inner chamber.

"I am going through the doorway," said Chung, staring at the blank wall before him. "Johnny is at the entrance to the second chamber." Mentally he said, *What we know, the others must know.*

"I can see Johnston, but not Chung," said Ivan. *What about the first expedition.*

That makes no difference, as you know; we can afford to take no chances. Follow my lead. "It is a corridor, with a right-angle bend. Here is a door, sealed. I will have to burn it down."

THE others were huddled about Steve now, listening tensely, but he did not know it. His grip on the arm of the pilot's chair was cruelly hard; the smooth metal pressed deep into his fingers, but he felt nothing.

There was a tense, cracking silence, and Chung's voice from the speaker: "The door is down."

Another agonizing pause, followed by a sharp, astonishing inhalation, as clear as though Chung stood beside them.

Steve heard his own voice, strange and harsh, saying, "What is it, Chung?" and could not believe that he had spoken.

Chung's voice was awed. "Steve—Kane—Mac— The first expedition. It's here—alive!"

"Alive?" someone croaked.

And then a gush of words came from the speaker: Chung's voice, and then Johnston interrupting, and even placid Helmars chiming in. There was a crypt, vitreous coffin, and inside, the bodies of the *Orion's* crew, with the light of intelligence in their eyes, and feeble, drugged, thoughts emanating from their minds.

Alive, alive, alive. . . . The word seemed tremendously important; it dinned in Steve's brain, shutting out caution. He leaped for a spacesuit. His fingers, sealing the helmet, were maddeningly slow, but at last it was done. He turned to the airlock and saw that MacDowall and Kane, behind him, were following his example, while Curtis and Vanzetti hovered undecided.

For a moment he wavered impatiently, his hand on the airlock door. Then he stopped and his hand dropped to his side.

"No," he said. "It won't do. Got to plan."

He looked wryly down at his weaponless belt. "I lost my head for a moment. Somebody should have kicked me."

Young Kane looked surprised. "But, Steve, surely there's no danger now?"

"We don't know. My father—" he choked involuntarily. "My father would never have done what I was about to do—not with the data we have." He crossed to a locker, thrust sidearms into the clips at his belt.

"You two come along, since you've already got into suits. The rest stay here and follow our progress. If anything happens to me, Vanzetti will take command."

Then he was diving into the airlock, not daring to wait longer.

Outside, the dark monolith beckoned across the low, jagged horizon. He forced his body toward it in great straining leaps,

conscious of the others behind him by their heavy breathing.

Alive!

Something struggled at the edge of his consciousness, but it could not form against the strength of that word, *alive*. He thrust it impatiently from him and raced on.

At the last ridge he stopped to take breath. There were vague shouts in his helmet phones. What?

Kane's excited voice, and MacDowall's peevish whine: "Wait, Steve! Wait, dammit!"

He turned impatiently and saw them struggling to overtake him, stumbling on the rough terrain that had seemed so much mist to him. He felt a sudden pain in his knee, and realized wonderingly that he must have fallen, perhaps more than once, and not known it.

What was happenning to him? He forced himself to think, and the hidden thought swarmed up from the depths of his mind.

He concentrated on it, fought to make it take form, and suddenly it burst like a bombshell.

He felt sick, as though something had struck him a nauseating, treacherous blow. Kane came up, and then MacDowall. They stopped, peering at his stricken face.

"Vanzetti!" he said, contending with the pain and the mad hatred that welled up inside him.

"Yes, Steve?"

"Use the scrambler—serial 103." He adjusted his own transmitter without waiting for an answer.

"Steve, have you gone mad? This can only mean there's something you want to keep from the others in suits. What—"

"Don't ask questions. I'm still in command; that's what they banked on." He smiled crookedly.

Chung's worried voice was in his ear; he ignored it.

"Look at the spy-ray film. Describe the crypt."

A pause. "Jet's on, Steve; you're the boss. There's an inclined ramp leading down, with a right-angle bend about three-quarters of the way down. Then a doorway, leading into a chamber, just as Chung described it. The chamber is roughly cubical, about twenty meters by twenty by twenty-five. Diagonally across from the outer door is another doorway, leading into a short passage and then into another chamber, smaller, about fifteen meters square by twenty-five in height. Below

both of these is a third chamber, about fifty by fifty, with no apparent means of entrance. My guess is there's a trap-door which doesn't show on the film."

"And beyond the second chamber?" Steve gritted.

"Why, nothing. Solid rock. Oh! But Chung—"

"Yes, but Chung," Steve repeated. "That's all. Unscramble." He clicked the dial of his transmitter.

"Chung," he said grimly, "why did you say there was a third chamber beyond the second?"

KANE and MacDowall were staring at him silently.

Chung said, "I don't understand. There is a third chamber. What is wrong, Steve?"

"Then why does the spy-ray film show only solid rock beyond the second chamber?"

There was a short, pregnant silence.

"It must be shielded," Chung cried desperately.

"Chung, listen carefully. These are orders. You have cameras. Take pictures of the members of the *Orion's* crew and bring them up with you, all three of you. Do it now."

"Very well, Steve," said Chung.

And then they waited.

They waited, while a bitter tide of self-reproach surged through Steve Kourmas and drowned the hatred and the pain.

Kane said, "What can have happened to them, Steve?"

Steve answered, from his tortured soul, "I don't know."

MacDowall, quiet for once, had trained his spy-ray on the monolith.

"Here they come," he announced.

They appeared up the ramp, one hooded figure after the other. Chung and Helmars bore between them a great metal coffer, embossed and diapered in strange patterns.

Silently they set it down and stood waiting.

"Where are the films, Chung?" Steve demanded.

Chung held out strips of dark plastic. "They were clouded," he said. "Radio-activity, I think."

Steve did not move to accept them.

"Clever," he said without emotion. He pointed to the coffer. "And this?"

"One of the coffins, containing a member of the first Alderamin expedition."

"But you said they were transparent," Kane objected.

"The others are," Chung rejoined impassively. "This one became opaque as soon as we removed it from the crypt."

"It's not good enough, Chung," Steve said grimly. "Mac, the spy-ray."

Johnston started involuntarily, but Chung and Helmars remained expressionless.

"Do you think I'm a fool?" MacDowall asked testily. "I've already examined it."

"Well?"

"Round objects, about ten of them. Not a man. . . . Look out!"

There was a gun in Chung's hand; Helmars and Johnston followed suit.

"I'm sorry, Steve, but you must come down into the crypt with us." The pilot beam of Chung's ray snapped on, focused unwaveringly on Steve's chest.

Steve faced him steadily. "Chung, you were once my friend. Put down that gun!"

"For the love that I bear you, Steve, I cannot. You cannot understand now, but we are right and you are wrong. You must come down with us."

"And if I refuse?" Steve demanded.

Chung's face was unreadable. "Then I must kill you."

Desperately Steve dived forward, clawing at his gun. The orifice of Chung's weapon flamed silently red, and behind Steve young Kane gave one strangled cry.

Then his own ray was out, and Chung reeled back into the doorway of the monolith, clutching the gaping shoulder of his spacesuit. There was a soundless interchange of rays as Helmars and Johnston, off balance, fired wildly, and MacDowall replied from somewhere behind Steve. Then the other two dropped after Chung into the doorway, and Steve, beside the profane MacDowall, was scrambling for shelter in the lee of a boulder. Steve cast a glance at Kane's limp, huddled figure, and saw that he was beyond aid.

"What do we do now?" MacDowall asked between damns, firing at a momentarily exposed head.

Steve peered cautiously at the doorway. Chung had apparently patched his spacesuit in time, for his helmeted head bobbed into view, a gun in his uninjured hand, and the rock beside Steve's head glowed a vicious red as he ducked. MacDowall fired at another head and drew a cry of pained alarm.

More rays from the doorway concentrated on the upper surface of the boulder, and glowing fragments rained down upon them.

In a few more minutes their position would be untenable.

"Make for the ship," Steve decided. Snapping a last ray at the doorway, he broke into a crouching run toward another boulder directly behind theirs. MacDowall reluctantly followed.

In a moment they were over the first ridge and running toward the ship. Steve looked back as they reached the next rise, but no one pursued them.

Vanzetti and Curtis, who had seen and heard everything, came out to meet them at the airlock, white and shaken.

"My God!" said Vanzetti over and over. "My God!"

"WHAT do we do now?" asked MacDowall again, several hours later.

"Wait," said Steve shortly. "They have air for thirty hours more; after that they'll have to come in."

"We could blast them out with the semi-portables," suggested MacDowall.

"Aside from the fact that they're still our comrades, even though they seem to have suddenly gone mad," Steve replied wearily, "if we should do that we'd never know what we came to find out."

He stared out through the visiplate toward the dimly visible monolith. In the swift, black night of this airless planet it was somehow sinister, foreboding.

Unfamiliar constellations stared coldly down at them; a star was occulted now and again by a murderous, silent meteorite. Suddenly there was movement out on the seared, tumbling plain. Steve leaned forward, straining to make it out.

"What is it?" asked Curtis tensely.

"Something moved."

"Do you think they'll try something?"

"Wouldn't you?"

Silence—then a ruddy flash of light, another, each briefly lighting up amorphous, spacesuited figures.

Steve pressed keys on the console before him; a powerful searchbeam lashed out, swung, steadied on a figure running toward the ship. Another crimson beam flashed behind it; the man staggered, clapped a hand to his side, and stumbled on. In another moment he was under the bulge of the ship, hammering weakly for admittance.

Steve swung the beam, caught two other figures, ray guns in their hands. Blinded, they hesitated, then drew back into the darkness.

"It's a trick," said MacDowall.

"Maybe."

"He's wounded," said Curtis.

"Let him in," Steve ordered. "Mac, we'll cover him."

Vanzetti manned the light, sweeping it over a full 180 degrees of arc while the other three, spacesuited, closed the airlock door behind them. As the outer door swung open a crumpled figure slumped into the lock. Curtis bent over him, dragged him inside. It was Ivan, his bearded face blue with oxygen-hunger.

Steve and MacDowall lowered their weapons.

"Get that door shut," Steve snapped.

There was a seared, gaping hole in the big man's armor, just under the left armpit. He had tried to cover it with an emergency patch as he ran, but had failed. He was weaponless.

Inside the ship, Curtis tore off his spacesuit and removed the injured man's helmet while Steve held the nozzle of a canister of oxygen under his nose and pressed the lever.

Slowly a healthy pink washed back to replace the purple of asphyxiation. Ivan opened his eyes.

"Thanks," he said. "I didn't think—I'd make it."

"What happened?" MacDowall demanded suspiciously.

"Get his suit off and dress that wound," said Steve. "We can ask questions afterward."

The engineer's wound was dangerous, but not critical. Skin and flesh over an area of ten square centimeters had been seared away and two ribs were charred and crumbling where they protruded from the ghastly cavity. When Curtis had removed the frozen blood that covered the wound in great solid gouts, and applied a temporary dressing, Ivan beckoned Steve nearer.

"You've got to capture them," he rumbled weakly. "They don't know what they're doing. Neither did I. That forcefield—mechanical hypnosis; but I was the last to go through, and it wore off. When I came to my senses and started back, they tried to kill me."

Steve bent over him tensely. "Do you know what's behind all this? Do you know what happened to the first expedition?"

Ivan nodded, sighed. "Yes. I'll try to tell you—but I'm sleepy . . ."

"I gave him a shot of neophrine," said Curtis. "Better wait till he wakes up."

"How much did you give him?" Steve demanded.

"Two c.c.'s; enough to keep him under for eight to ten hours."

"You're sure he's safe for that long?"

Curtis gestured eloquently. "With that hole in him? Certainly."

"Jets on, Mac, it's your watch. The rest of us will get some sleep and question him in the morning."

They left him sleeping quietly in his cubby, with the pallid light of the stars shining through a porthole on his great, black-bearded face.

STEVE awoke to an uneasy sense of something wrong. Diluted sunlight was streaming through the polarized porthole over his bunk. . . . Over his bunk! Horror-stricken, not yet understanding, he stared at the wall above his head, which should have been the ceiling. Then he felt the steady throbbing of the atomic engines down below and knew with a terrible certainty that they were in accelerating flight; his bunk had swung upon its cushioned gimbals to face away from the new center of gravity.

He sprang to his feet—but somehow he had not moved. Something restrained him at his first motion, held him down with an iron hand. He looked down.

He was manacled to the bunk.

Presently a man in the tunicked uniform they all wore climbed down the ladder into his cubby. Steve tasted the last dregs of despair as the man turned to face him, and he saw that it was Chung.

For a moment they stared at each other in silence. Chung's features, as always, were impassive. Steve thought he detected in Chung's eyes a gleam of compassion, but he was not comforted.

"It was a trick then," he said at last.

"Yes," said Chung. "Only Ivan could have done it. He fought the neophrine, and then he overpowered MacDowall and admitted us. We have been in space five hours."

"Do you mind telling me where we're going?" Steve said bitterly.

"No. I am sorry that we could not take you into the crypt so that you could have understood fully that and other things, but we dared not waste the time. We are going to an unnamed star, Cepheus 20z3940. It is the nearest star in this cluster, but it is ten light-years distant; the trip will take long."

"Is that where my—where the first expedition went?"

"In all probability, yes. We hope that they arrived safely with their cargo, but we have no way of knowing, and so we must make the journey ourselves."

"But why?" Steve burst out suddenly.

"Can you tell me why?"

"It is because of the seed," said Chung, as if that explained everything. "So that the Ferein may live again."

"Who are the Ferein?"

"A great and proud and beautiful race," Chung replied softly, "who died with that planet we have just left, Alderamin Three."

"And now," he continued, opening the kit which hung at this side, "I must put you into the coldsleep. Ivan and Johnny are already sleeping; they are both wounded more gravely than I, and so I stand the first watch." He drew out a hypodermic, filled it carefully from a tiny ampule.

Steve struggled wildly, hopelessly, but he was manacled too tightly; he could not prevent Chung from opening his sleeve.

The needle came nearer.

And then he saw an apparition. Up the ladder behind Chung came a wild-eyed, blood-smeared figure still recognizable as Kane, a spanner clutched in his hand.

This was delirium. He turned his face from it in silent agony, and waited for the needle to descend, to write finish to all that he had lived and fought for.

But there was a dull thud and a tinkling on the floor. No needle pricked his shrinking arm.

He opened his eyes wonderingly; Chung was gone from his field of vision, and Kane was still there, swaying a little, the spanner hanging loosely in his hand.

The man who looked like Kane dropped the spanner—it must have fallen upon Chung, for it made no noise—and, gritting his teeth, began to unlink Steve's manacles. Still Steve did not speak.

A ghastly, splintered, dark-brown horn of congealed blood protruded from the ghost's temple; lines of it ran across his cheek and descended from his nostrils; his face was purple with burst capillaries.

"You're alive!" said Steve, as though he still could not believe it.

Kane nodded, and then winched as though the movement gave him exquisite pain. "Damn good thing," he whispered.

The last manacle dropped. Steve rose and stood on the bulkhead beside Chung's inert body, just in time to catch young Kane as he fell. He laid him tenderly on the bunk.

"Pencil-beam," whispered Kane. "Went through my helmet, grazed my skull. Air went out of helmet, but blood went out, too. Froze, stopped the hole; saved my life. Great stuff, blood." His voice trailed off, then rose again.

"Saw somebody let Chung, Johnny into ship. Sneaked in just in time. Hid in engine-room cubby; climbed out, came to rescue. Clever, huh?"

And then, quite peacefully, he fainted.

It was three hours since Steve had released the other members of the crew, and for two hours they had been working over Chung, and over Helmars and Johnston, revived from the coldsleep.

"But it's no use," said Curtis, amazement frozen on his lined face. "I've tried hypnotism—what I could—and automatic response; lie detectors; truth serums; neoscopolamine, and even as much *vrenza* as I dared. Each one tells a series of perfectly plausible stories, and no two of them match."

"And all of those stories," Steve said bitterly, "are calculated to keep us from turning back. Did you notice that?"

"What are you going to do?" asked Vanzetti.

Steve shrugged. "Go on, of course."

Nobody seemed to have anything to say.

Chung's voice floated up the passage well. "Steve! Steve! You must listen to me!"

"Pouring it on," Steve said. "What is it that makes them so frantic to get to Cepheus -40?"

"What about those metal chests down in the hold?" Vanzetti asked.

"Mack is down there now, still trying to open them. But he won't. They're made of a metal that our beams won't cut; we can't force the lids because there isn't any purchase, and we'd never hit on the combination of those locks in a thousand years."

Steve rose abruptly and strode to the port-hole. "Everything is like those locks," he grated. "It's like a puzzle put together in the fourth dimension; alien, all of it, even the crazy logic that holds it together."

He turned toward them. "Do you know what Chung told me was in those coffers, when he thought it didn't matter what he said to me? Seed. Seed. But don't try to extrapolate from that, because you'll be wrong. The answer to all these questions is buried with the ashes of the race that built

that monolith—unless it's waiting for us where we're going."

Curtis had been watching him intently. He stepped forward. "Careful, Steve; you'll crack up."

Steve looked at him in surprise, and then smiled wearily. "No, I won't," he said simply. "I can't. There's something inside me—you don't know. It stopped me once before when I almost spilled the apple cart, and it won't let me break now. I could use a sedative, but I've got a year and a half of the Sleep ahead of me, and there's nothing better than that."

Curtis grinned back slowly. "Jets on and blasting, Steve; you're still the boss."

He turned as MacDowall swung himself up into the control chamber.

"No luck," said the archeologist before Steve could speak. "Good technicians, those—what did Chung call them?"

"Ferein," Steve told him, biting the word savagely.

"Of course, Ferein; Ferein. *Hmm.*" He rubbed his bruised skull reflectively. "Pity we haven't anything to give us a line on what they were like. Nothing but the engravings on the coffers. Do you know, I spent half the time I was down there staring at those damned designs?"

"I'm not surprised," Vanzetti murmured.

MacDowall ignored him. "They're beautiful, Steve. There's something in them that I've never seen before in the decorations of any non-human race. Never."

Steve stared at him. "What are you getting at?"

"Nothing, maybe. Just that I think the Ferein were manlike, not monsters like the Polarians or any of the other races we've met and exterminated since Lowe's rocket. I don't see them fitting into the pattern that's building up. That's all. I don't draw any conclusions yet; I keep an open mind."

"So do I," said Steve.

"Of course, of course. . . . How's Kane?"

"Under the Sleep," Curtis answered. "It's the best thing I or anybody could do for him now. He'll be all right, except that his face will be scarred until he can get home to a plastic surgeon."

"Good. Good. Well, whose watch?"

"Mine," Vanzetti told him. "I'll put the rest of you under any time you like."

One by one, Steve last of all, they drifted off to their bunks, and, under Vanzetti's needle, into the dreamless Sleep. The ship bore on, its mighty engines driving it tire-

lessly forward, while the wheeling galaxies marked off the passing of weeks and months, and one yellow dwarf star singled itself out from the myriads ahead, and grew slowly, inexorably larger.

ONCE again the great ship, shining in the light of yet another alien star, dropped down toward the disc of a planetoid, the innermost of eight. The others, giants in comparison with this one, were cold, ammonia-methane worlds, too far from their primary for life. In contrast, the first planet looked as Alderamin Three might have looked in its youth; a clear, oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, tenuous by Earth standards, but life-giving; for the green of vegetation spread across its broad continents and made its myriad islets a stipple of color across the face of its oceans.

Steve stared at its inverted image suspended above him, his heart pounding with an urgency he had never felt in other landings. When Curtis had awakened him from the Sleep he had felt refreshed, his nerves calmed and steadied since his last conscious moment. But now that the journey was almost done, all the old anxiety came stealthily back, making his sturdy knees tremble with unaccustomed nervousness, blurring his eyes unaccountably. He shook his head impatiently and the planet steadied, came into focus.

What was he hoping to see? Why had Chung and the other two, still in irons and protesting complete recovery, started the *Viking* on this mad journey across the abyss from one lone outpost of matter to another?

The image grew, swung slightly. Hardly realizing what he did, Steve corrected the flow of mighty energies his finger-tips controlled, centered the swelling planet once more.

Down . . . Down . . . Was there to be nothing but continents and seas, and featureless greenery?

There! Just down the horizon, a glint of reflected light. His tense fingers stabbed down on the console, swung the ship in a bone-crushing bank toward the place where that tiny glint of light had been.

Beside him, Vanzetti grunted harshly. Steve could sense the other's uneasiness, but neither spoke. There was no time nor breath for conversation.

The atmosphere piled up around them as they arrowed down. A soft sibilance, almost

too low for hearing, mounted swiftly into a whine, and then a fierce scream of wind. Then he saw the light again and he braked their fall swiftly.

Even as it was, they would pass over it.

It went past them, far below, too swiftly for close observation, but Steve caught a glimpse of a tall new city, with wide, curving streets encircling clusters of slim, crystal towers.

That's it, he wanted to say, but he could not form the spoken words, could not bring himself to speak; he could only fight the controls, bringing the ship around in a tight, straining arc, braking its speed to bring it back to that shining city.

There were factories clustered about the outskirts of the city, cubed, compact structures, exhaling their almost invisible waste gases far from the residential centers.

Farther in there were spacious parks, and great bare spaces that might be intended for landing fields, then comfortably separated homes, all in an architecture of strangely beautiful curves and angles. Then the crystal towers appeared, grouped in ever-increasing height and beauty around a slim central spire that was the hub of the city. The other towers hid it from Steve as they came up, but he could see that it was a deep amber color, in contrast to the untinted purity of the others.

Then they were directly over it, soaring on their airfoils, and Steve had no eyes for the colorful throngs that surged in the central square, faces upturned to follow their flight—for huddled in a kind of cradle at the base of the amber spire was, unmistakably, the *Orion*.

And embedded in that clear amber—dear God, what were those dark, sinister shapes?

He whipped the *Viking* into another narrow turn, fighting for altitude.

"Adjust the viewpoint," he gritted to Vanzetti as they came into position again. "Telescopic."

Vanzetti's swift fingers magnified the image, brought the inverted spire so near it looked almost within reach. So near. . . .

There was no mistake. The enormity of it numbed him for long, immeasurable moments while he kept the ship automatically circling the spire—but it was true. There were eight of the dark shapes, spaced with mathematical exactness from top to bottom, embedded like bugs in plastic—the corpses of the crew of the *Orion*.

HE had not thought, he told himself dully, not even in his worst nightmares, to see the topost figure's white beard thus, cloudily through amber crystal, like a mounted specimen. Even if his father had been captured by some savage race and they had put his head upon a pole, his long beard matted with the filth they had flung at him, that would have been bearable. But this—

And then, suddenly, a red curtain snapped down over his vision, and he heard his raw voice shouting orders.

"Curtis! Man your guns!"

He heard a stifled gasp, but in a moment the reply came steadily: "Guns manned."

Steve whipped the ship about again. "Raze the city."

"Steve—"

"Raze the city!"

The pale white pilot beams of the *Viking's* port and starboard batteries lashed down, and where they touched black destruction trailed its way across the massed buildings. For a moment, as they went over, Steve saw the milling crowds pause in horror. When he had turned back, the last of them were disappearing swiftly into the buildings, leaving only their dead.

The rays flicked off.

"I can't do it, Steve," said Curtis harshly. "It's mass murder."

Steve twisted in impotent rage in the confining deceleration tank. "Didn't you see?" he cried furiously. "Didn't you see what they did to those men?"

"Yes, but that doesn't prove—"

"Imbecile! MacDowall, man the guns!"

There was only a slight pause. "No, Steve."

And Curtis: "You'd better set her down and let us talk it over."

Blindly, Steve turned the ship back over the city. "Are you both mad? Can't you understand—"

The *Viking* heeled over abruptly, and three closely-grouped red danger lights winked on on the instrument panel. Steve banked automatically and saw the pale beams reaching up from the ship at the base of the amber spire.

"They're raying us from the *Orion*!" he cried. "Curtis!"

The beams swung nearer again, and he accelerated wildly to avoid them.

An instant's hesitation, and the *Viking's* rays flared down again, groping for the ship below. For a moment they grazed its hull, leaving crumpled, incandescent metal, and

then swung wide as Steve frantically maneuvered to dodge the *Orion's* battery.

"Got one of their forward guns," said Curtis. "They aren't shielded." He grunted as Steve looped suddenly out of the way of a beam. "Oh-oh. Look!"

A group of tiny figures in a central square near the grounded ship had trundled out a shining deadly mechanism and were training its huge orifice on the *Viking*. A scintillating violet beam leapt out, missing them by scant meters. Steve dodged, only to run foul of a ray from the *Orion*. The ship nosed over violently.

"Port drive rocket gone," Steve announced in a voice drained of emotion.

"Has it struck anyone as odd," asked MacDowall, "that they haven't any fixed armament?" But no one heard him.

Inexorably the *Orion's* batteries closed in, forcing them to lose more and more altitude. A lucky shot by Curtis silenced half a battery, and another incinerated the mobile unit's crew; but the gun itself was unharmed and another group had it in action again in thirty seconds.

Weaving erratically from the uneven drive of the four remaining jets, the *Viking* blundered into another beam, and yet another. And then, inevitably, it stalled in the middle of a loop. The violet beam struck home.

Steve was conscious of a thunderous clang, like the blow of a giant's hammer on a steam boiler; he saw the hull of the control chamber crumple like paper, and watched, with a curious detached horror, as the image in his visiplat tilted crazily up and up.

So it's really happened. This is the finish, after all, he thought.

The silence was suddenly startling as the remaining jets cut out. With agonizing slowness the low whine of wind in the gaping rent in the hull built up to a scream. He caught a fleeting, kaleidoscopic glimpse of the ground rushing up to meet them, and then the *Viking* crashed.

NARA of the Ferein gazed sadly out over the ruins of the city in the gathering twilight.

"Our fathers did not anticipate this," he said aloud.

Give yourself peace, came the thought of his companion, Lex. *The fault was not theirs; nor is the damage too great. All will be well with us now—and with them.*

Nara turned and smiled at her affec-

tionately. *Have you examined their minds?*

Yes. Little is to be learned from the ones who were hypnotized, or from any of the others, except their leader, Steve. It was he who ordered the destruction of the city, and his thoughts, in sleep, are chaotic.

He should be conscious by now. Shall we go in?

Nara linked his arm in hers and, fastening their respirators, they entered the improvised airlock of the hospital ward.

Cradled in the great downy Ferein bed, Steve's battered body, already half-healed, was stirring, almost awake.

They are strange people, Nara thought. The upper jaw fixed, the lower mobile. . . . He looks somewhat like the other, the white-haired one.

His son, answered Lex, briefly.

Nara sighed softly. *Ah! That explains much.*

Steve's eyes fluttered slowly open. In the subdued light of the room he saw the two tall, green-skinned creatures standing over him. Both were clean-limbed and graceful; both were made subtly monstrous by the masks of their respirators. He felt the dull ache of scarcely-healed wounds, and glared up at the two in hopeless defiance.

Thought-images crept into Steve's mind.

A fair, green world, swimming slowly around its life-giving parent star: Alderamin Three. An ancient, mature race; great shining cities that were poems in crystal. Science; the arts; machines that worked endlessly without attention, releasing men from their age-old slavery; war and dissention things of dimly-remembered history, for the race had ages ago achieved telepathy, and with it complete understanding.

Eons passed. The warm, beneficent sun grew cold; atmosphere escaped from the planet's slight gravitational field. Hastily, then desperately, the tall green-skinned race worked to find a way to escape the end of their cycle. Space-flight. No—the other two worlds in their system were too small, too close to the sun. Their atmosphere was long gone; and they were seared, lifeless sepulchers. And in the remaining time they could not hope to build spaceships that would take them to another star.

One slim chance was left to them. They could not survive the death of their planet, but their children might. Their egglike ova, in suspended animation, they encased in a monolith so builded that it would endure for countless millenia. In all that time, per-

haps some race that had solved the problem of inter-stellar flight would reach their dead world. This was their only chance to insure that all their struggle, up from the streaming jungles of their primordial youth, should not have been in vain.

Inside the monolith, with the genius born of their desperation, they erected a mechanism that would keep watch over their future through all the ages to come. Whenever an intelligent being should enter that monolith, the machine would awake and impress upon the cells of his brain the inescapable necessity, strong as the instinct of survival itself, to take the ova to another star-system, where they could live again. This they did, and then, with resignation, and with hope, they died.

After unguessable millenia, the million-to-one chance came to pass: eight human beings from far Sol had landed upon the desiccated planet, and obeyed the commands of the machine. They had carried the seed, as much of it as they had room for, to this green young planet of another star; here they had brought the ova to life and carefully nurtured them until the swift-maturing beings could care for themselves. With machines and telepathic records brought from Alderamin Three, they had helped them to build their shining new city, and to start again the interrupted chain of their civilization.

And then, Steve's thought welled up bitterly, the glorious Ferein killed them!

No! came the startled, horrified thought. And then the pictures again:

The Earthmen had not enough fuel left to return to their home planet, and they were unable to synthesize more. There was an element in the air of this planet, essential to the Ferein, but deadly to them. What was the Earth word—*radon*? They knew that another expedition would follow to discover their fate. And so, with their full consent, the Ferein had put them into suspended animation, and sealed their bodies into chambers in the amber spire at the hub of the city, a monument of gratitude to their deliverers.

Now that the second expedition was come there would be enough fuel to take some of them, at least, back to their home planet. And another ship could come from Earth to take back the rest.

"My father? Alive?" Filled with incredulous, numbing hope, Steve sat up in

(Continued on page 66)



JOURNEY'S END

By WALTER KUBILIUS

AN agony of pain sat upon Burnett's chest. How long it racked him he did not know, for consciousness was slow in coming. Every cell of his lungs cried for air. He breathed—and gasped chokingly.

Water!

"Look—he moves!" a faint voice cried from a measureless distance.

Burnett choked, flailed with his arms, turning, desperately trying to rise as he suddenly remembered where he was.

The preservative solution! That fool Ko-Tan had failed in adapting the energy transformer to the production of Zitalite—the liquid that preserved living organic matter forever. He, Burnett, was now

doomed to die in the spaceship like all the others.

His tortured lungs gasped for air as his head emerged above the waterline. Weakly he placed his arm on the edge of the tank and collapsed, waiting for his beating heart to subside.

"Quick! Bring me the towel—he needs help," a voice said. Burnett heard light steps walk away and return.

"Here it is."

Strong arms lifted him from the tank and gently led him to a couch. His eyes were still closed and felt heavy. Too much of the sediment must have deposited upon them.

Burnett leaned back upon the couch and sighed in relief as someone washed and rubbed his aching muscles.

"Ah! That's good, Ko-Tan," he said—and then suddenly remembered there were two people in the room beside him, not one. "Fool!" he said sharply. "Who else is here? I thought I swore you to secrecy. There'll be the devil to pay if the others hear of this. Open my eyes!"

Defiant fingers carefully brushed away the caked deposit. Burnett looked upward, blinking rapidly and accustoming himself to the light. So the preservation had failed, he thought. Well, there was nothing else to do but await the inevitable.

Sensing his thoughts, the seated figure next to him spoke.

"There will be a shock," he said. "Prepare."

Burnett faced him, but his eyes could not discern the features clearly even yet.

"I am not Ko-Tan," the man said.

"Then—then where is he?" Burnett said wonderingly. He looked at the man. He was short and extremely pale. His hairless head seemed to be of unusual size.

"My name is Milavo," he said. "This is my wife, Lita." A short and pale woman bowed low, said:

"I am honored, noble ancestor."

Burnett turned sharply to Milavo.

"How long has it been?" he snapped.

"The preservative solution was always in perfect condition," Milavo said. "There was no reason to awaken you before the time, so your ancient instructions were obeyed to the letter."

"How long?" Burnett demanded.

Milavo paused before answering. He looked into Burnett's eyes.

"Five thousand years."

"Liar!" Burnett shouted. "Stupid liar! In five thousand years the language would have changed—but you speak English. In five thousand years the very physical structure of the human race would change—"

He could not go on. He saw, all at once, that—Milavo and Lita *were* changed. Their albino color, tendril-like fingers, and huge heads already set them apart from him.

"We learned your language from records. Our own has changed much." He exchanged a number of fluid but clipped sentences with his wife. Burnett could not understand them. "As to physical changes, you can see we are—different."

CONFUSED, Burnett stood up and walked to the great circular window facing the void that he knew so well. In the distance a blazing sun shone fiercely. Almost below his feet was a round blue-brown planet, here and there dotted with cottonlike formations of clouds. A strange yearning shook him.

"Earth!" he said.

Milavo shook his head.

"The second planet of Proxima Centauri."

"—I remember," said Burnett.

Instinctively he looked up into the heavens and his eyes sought the sun he had known.

It still shone, a small brilliant point in a field of cold darkness.

"Earth, Mars, and all the planets?" he asked. "What of them?"

"Charred cinders," Milavo answered. "The sun became a nova shortly after you were placed in the preservative solution."

"Before," Burnett said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"It happened before I was placed in the preservative. I saw the nova."

Burnett shuddered as he remembered. The spaceship *Victory* was far beyond the orbit of Pluto when the sun burst in an all-consuming flash. The outer layers of the sun were blown off with a speed that almost reached that of light. The gravitational effect of the collapsing core squeezed out waves of pure energy—electrons and ions, gamma rays, cosmic and ultra-violet rays grappled and burst through.

Nothing survived the first flash. All life was destroyed with a single mighty blow. Only the scarred but still flying *Victory*, far beyond Pluto's orbit, contained a handful of human lives. Twenty years were spent in searching the solar system for another spaceship that might miraculously have escaped the nova. None was found.

It was with a sinking heart that Burnett and the men and women of the crew realized that the *Victory* contained the last of the human race.

Then, with heart-breaking sadness, they turned their backs to the solar graveyard and headed toward Proxima Centauri, the nearest star.

Rising from his brief reverie Burnett turned to Milavo. "The estimated time for the journey between the solar system and Centauri was four hundred years. How is it you claim five thousand years elapsed?"

Lita moved quietly to a single shelf on which lay a few dust-covered volumes.

"We have reconstructed the history of our

ship," she said. "It may help you to catch up?"

Burnett smiled.

"Thank you," he said, taking the volumes.

"We will leave you now," Milavo said.

"We must make arrangements for landing on the Second Planet."

"Journey's end, eh?" Burnett mused as Milavo and Lita left him alone. He thought for a long while before opening the first book.

THE years passed. The original crew that left Earth had long since dissolved into nothingness and their children's children took their place. The Earth's small, hot sun still rose and set, but only over a dead scarred world. In his preservative solution Burnett lived on.

Alone, of all the gigantic crew, he had no wife nor child. Ko-Tan devised the preservative means of keeping him in suspended animation until the *Victory* would reach Centauri, four hundred years thence.

One hundred years passed, and then another. The essence of Earth culture was contained in the ship. Though the individuals might die the race went on. This was the long voyage to a new home.

The lights were dimmed during the rest hours. Though for the past seventy years the *Victory* had not encountered a single formidable meteor stream, every portion of space was carefully watched. On this day Lisabeth, together with Jon, stood guard over the instrument panels.

"How silent it is!" she said. "I can almost hear my heart beating in the stillness."

Only a soft light played upon the gauges. The rest of the room was in darkness. They could watch the broad sweep of stars through the great curved windows that almost surrounded them.

"Somewhere out there is Centauri," she whispered—"the star we will never reach."

"Our descendant's will," Jon said.

Lisabeth blushed. Jon reached for her hand.

"Promise," he said, "that when the next council meeting comes you'll agree to be my mate."

Her eyes turned away. Neither of them saw the violent flickering on the panel. Their hearts were elsewhere.

"I—" she began to say, answering the pressure of his hand—but the words were never finished.

Faintly the pit-pat of meteorites striking the shell of the spaceship could be heard. One glance at the burning red gauge that marked the presence of foreign bodies told her all that was needed.

"Sound the alarm!" she cried.

It rang suddenly, sharply, breaking the stillness. Sleepy-eyed men poured into the corridors, carrying spacesuits on their shoulders. There was no panic. Each donned his protective garment, went to his appointed place. All doors were immediately sealed. If a meteor smashed through the walls they would have time—and air—to repair the damage.

The pounding upon the walls became louder and louder. Uneasily the men and women looked at each other. It was difficult to walk as the ship was buffeted right and left by the swarm of pelting stones. Lisabeth's calm face, shining through the globe of her spacesuit, reassured him. They would ride this out!

The floor beneath them plunged violently. The lights blinked and then suddenly died. The floor was waving crazily under them as the motors sputtered, trying to break through a crushing weight. A thin line of stars, now visible upon the wall, told him that the ship had cracked. A second crash struck behind him, and the night enveloped him. . . .

When consciousness came back he dimly saw the great rent through the center of the ship. Around it lay the bodies of men whose spacesuits had been pierced by meteorites as they strove to repair the break. The control board had been smashed; the great library wrecked.

Sick at heart, he moved slowly towards the rent and seized the metal welder from the grasp of one of the fallen men. He took a position and slowly began to work, extending the wall of the ship so it would reach the other side and close the great gap. The hail of meteorites still shot through, though the rent was becoming smaller and smaller.

Weakly he collapsed as, feeling a warm rush of blood upon his arm, he knew he was struck.

Slowly, before final darkness would seize him, he made his way to the body of Lisabeth. He looked through the broken helmet and saw the stone-still lips, forever closed around the words, *I promise*. . . .

But before the void closed in upon him he knew the rent had been repaired. The *Victory* would reach Centauri after all.

TWO thousand years later—

The welts on his back burned deeply. The whips of the Prophet's slaves had dug sharp. A small trail of blood lay behind him as he crawled his way to the Sanctuary.

A slight noise froze him still. He paused, not daring to breathe, and listened. All was still in the heart of the great ship. As yet the body of the stupid guard had not been found.

The alarm was not given. There was still time.

Painfully he crawled on, conscious that his life's blood was slowly dripping away. What was it he had said on that eventful moment a few hours ago?

The Veil! Yes, that was it—the Veil. Defying the law that said no one but the Prophet could go past the Veil to see the Presence, he did go through and saw—the Presence!

For years—for centuries—the Prophets had terrorized the people with threats of death and punishment should their wishes be disobeyed. Always he had believed them. Always, that is, until he overheard the Prophet saying to one of his lesser priests, "You know, the Ancients would not call us Prophets. They would call us engineers. A curious word, is it not?"

He thought and thought about that word until he determined to find out for himself what it meant. And that was why he went beyond the Veil to see—the Presence!

He laughed. The Presence. It was a monstrous hoax. The great god Engo Transfo was not a god at all. It was nothing but a great, terrible machine!

True, it made marvelous things. It made air and food and metal and all the things the people needed, but nevertheless it was still a machine.

An engineer, then, was someone who could run the machine, the god which was called in the old days an energy transformer. Why, then, could he not be an engineer?

"There is no Presence!" he had told the people—and they beat him.

"It is only a machine. We could build another if we would study it!" And they whipped him and put him in prison, where the Prophets tortured him.

Very well, then! his delirious mind was saying. Let the Prophets stop me now—if they can!

He crawled past the black Veil that hid Engo Transfo in the Sanctuary. A sleeping guardsman did not feel the silken noose

tighten around his neck until it was too late. He took the blade from the body, climbed the few steps that arched over the mass of tubes and wires. With one sweep he smashed a single glowing tube that gave life to the motors. One slash followed another and the crisscrossed wires became tangled shreds. A burbling tube broke through and purple gas spilled over the delicate gears and cams, smoke rising in angry billows.

Weakly he dropped the sword upon the delicate crystals that lay in the heart of the transformer. One blinding flash followed another in roaring succession.

Sudden silence. He crawled to the foot of the machine, held to the Veil, and, falling, dragged it down with him. The Veil was broken. The frightened people would see for themselves that the Presence was nothing but a machine. They would force the priests and prophets to fix the life-giving machine—and then teach them how to run it.

Then all would be engineers—just as even Saint Burnett, whose body lay sleeping, must have been an engineer in his time.

FOUR thousand years after the nova—

"Father, what is outside?"

"Outside? Why, what do you mean?"

"The blackness there, with all the little white lights."

"Nothing," the older man said. "There's nothing there but space and those lights which we call stars."

For a moment the boy was satisfied. Then another question came from his lips.

"Father, who made everything?"

Startled, he could not answer immediately. "Why," he stammered, "no one. It was always here."

"McLain says that people made everything. He says that all this is not really our home, that we're staying here only until we find another home."

The elderly man was irritated. "If McLain is so smart," he snapped, "ask him why. Isn't he satisfied here?"

"Oh."

The boy was disappointed and left. Always he had been given the same sort of answers, as if people didn't really care. Only old McLain shared his curiosity about the outside.

"Read this book," the frail old man said, giving him some faded scraps of paper. Most of it he couldn't understand. Maybe when he was grown up and taught the secrets of

the energy transformer he would understand, but not now. The book was all about the *Victory*, how it was built and how it could be made to move. He did not read any of that for his attention was on the chapter that dealt with the door. It wasn't an ordinary door, he found out; it was called an airlock. It was really two doors instead of one, and they opened to the outside.

During one rest period he determined to open the door—just once. Then he would close it.

He had memorized the number to turn and was surprised to find that the wheels moved easily and quickly. He heard a single snap—and pushed the door open.

He could see nothing. He pushed the door still wider. When the light fell over his shoulder he saw that it opened to a small room at whose end was the second door.

Quickly he made his way to the second door and pulled at the dials, slowly turning them. He heard the first click, the second—and then felt McLain's bony hand upon his shoulder.

"Fool!" the old man's voice grated in his ear. "Do you want to kill all of us! The frozen void is death!"

"I—I—the outside!" the boy whimpered, frightened.

"Never mind," McLain said, becoming kinder and turning the boy away. "It is our fault for becoming so satisfied with our life here that we forget to explain the hair-breadth of life we occupy in death-dealing space. . . ."

BURNETT could read no longer. He closed the door and shuddered. Human life had hung in the balance on a thousand and one occasions, when only a single step was needed to destroy forever the last vestige of Earth's life.

At last the terrible struggle was over. Proxima Centauri had been reached.

Milavo, Lita, and another group of albino-white, large-headed humans came into his room.

"We have landed on the second planet," Milavo said. "Would you be the first to walk upon its soil? Perhaps it means something to you."

Burnett's heart hammered. It did. Five thousand years ago he had seen the Earth go up in smoke. He had made a pledge then, to Ko-Tan.

"This ship, the *Victory*," he had said,

"contains all that remains of the human race. Every empire and tradition ever spawned upon our mother planet lives in us from now on. We can never return, but we can find another planet. We can make another Earth. This is good-by. None of us will see Earth again. You will know only the solitude of space and the loneliness of the stars. You will grow old and die. I shall be the only one to set foot upon another planet. But I give you my word, Ko-Tan—that planet will be another Earth. I swear it!"

Remembering what he had said, in impressive silence Burnett walked down the plank to the soil of the second planet. Milavo, Lita, and a few others followed. The great majority of the ship's crew remained, staring curiously out of the windows.

Burnett breathed deeply. The air was rich in oxygen, but nevertheless quite suitable. Only a glance was needed to tell him that. Rich foliage was everywhere. The lower forms of animal life, somewhat different from Earth types, chattered in the forest. In the distance purple mountains broke the day, bringing early evening.

The planet was young. Earth must have been like this in the days of Eden.

He turned happily to Milavo and Lita.

"This will make a splendid home," he said. "I never dreamed there'd be such a luxurious planet circling Centauri. This is almost a replica of Earth. What a glorious civilization we can build here!

"We must test the soil for radio-active metals," Burnett went on, "and set about to build more energy transformers. We will certainly need many. Secondly, a group of us must minutely explore the planet for all possible traces of other intelligent life. Should we find any we must make our intentions clear and unmistakable. I do not think we will have any trouble, though. The planet seems to have been made for us."

"You—you will stay?" Milavo said, as if not comprehending Burnett's plans.

"Why, of course we will stay!"

"No. No," Milavo said quickly. "You, not us."

Burnett looked quickly at him. "I didn't understand you," he said sharply.

"We will not stay here," Milavo said.

Amazed, Burnett could only stare at him.

"In heaven's name," he shouted, "why not? This planet is ideal, I tell you! You'll never find another one like it, no matter how

much you search! This is journey's end, I tell you—it's like coming home again!"

Milavo looked about him. Lita clung to his arms. A strange bird screeched in a tree. Leaves rustled as the wind blew through them. The sky was brilliant red in the glory of a sunset.

Burnett broke the stillness.

"What is wrong?" he asked, though he began to suspect.

Lita clung closer to Milavo.

"It—it is horrible!" Milavo said.

THE others, one by one, had quietly walked back to the ship.

"Yes, it's ugly. Monstrously ugly!" Lita said.

Burnett could not believe his ears. "This—" he gestured—"ugly?"

A butterfly flew overhead and alighted on his shoulder.

Lita screamed, broke away, and ran to the ship. Milavo's pale face was even whiter. Even the startled flight of the butterfly did not ease him.

"Is this beauty?" he demanded. "I never dreamed such a hellish planet could exist! Look at the ground," he said. "Vermin! The air—filled with strange particles of loose matter that will clog our lungs and kill us. Microscopic germs everywhere. Listen, Burnett, your body has been brought up in such a revolting planet that it seems to be like nothing. But for five thousand years we have lived decently and sanely in a scientific environment which we ourselves made pure and clean. Do you think we'd give that up and live in the horrible impurity of this ugly planet? Never!"

Bewildered, Burnett could only gape at him. "But this is home," he said. "This is where we started out to go." Lamely he stopped.

"The human race has changed," Milavo said. "We could never endure planetary life, and would not survive in such an environment. Our home is space. We build our environment in our ship. There we live; on a planet we would die. I must go back."

He turned and waited at the door. When Burnett did not follow, he entered and closed the lock. . . .

Burnett sat down on a small ledge. *Ugly. Monstrous. Revolting.* Those words flew back and forth in his brain. Milavo was right; the human race had changed. It had changed so much that that which was once

thought to be an integral part of human nature, Earth love, turned out to be nothing.

Five thousand years in space, with all its hardships and experiences, had given the colony a common tradition, a common culture which was utterly alien to the planetary life of their ancestors.

What could Milavo know of the strange sensation that filled him as he clutched a handful of dirt and crushed it in his hand, thinking of the wheat, rye, and fruits that it could yield? And what did he himself know of the life which Milavo, Lita, and all the other descendants of his friends experienced?

Once the fish had lost its gills in evolution, it could not go back to the water. The *Victory* would never come back to any Earth.

Milavo opened the door and called out, "Will you come with us?"

Burnett shook his head. Tears filled his eyes.

The great rocket shook and rumbled away. He watched it leave, rising up into the darkness from whence it came.

When he was alone Burnett thought of Ko-Tan, his crew, and the promise he had made to start a new Earth. He had failed.

Alone, the last of the human race, he would die. The culture and civilization he had known would die with him.

But he looked up into the heavens, at the gigantic expanse of numberless stars, and suddenly knew that human life had not failed. If Man had a destiny, it could still be fulfilled.

True, planetary life was over. But Milavo and Lita, and their children's children, faced another life. An earthbound people became a space-dwelling people. In the centuries to come they would discover ways and means of making other spaceships, and these ships would be filled with their children. Where there was one *Victory* in the skies there would be two. Then four—six—a dozen.

The instinct of the race to survive and reproduce would never perish.

Millions of years would pass, and the void would be filled with cities occupied by the descendants of men and women who, finding the secret of atomic power, left the prisons of the planets forever.

Burnett looked up into the sky. The cosmic design was clear.

THE END

Stepping - Stone to the Stars

By WILLY LEY

Is the "Station in Space" obsolete? Maybe not—but very likely it won't be used for the purpose for which it was designed!

REMEMBER the story, *F. P. 1 Doesn't Answer?*

It was the story of Flight Platform No. 1, an artificial floating island to be placed in the middle of the Atlantic to receive and refuel trans-Atlantic airplanes. It was not just a science-fiction idea; it was a serious project which originated in the early twenties after a number of attempts at crossing the Atlantic had ended disastrously.

The project was advanced much farther than most people realize. Armstrong, in England, built a scale model of "F. P. 1" of large dimensions—I believe at the scale of an inch to the foot—and the Germans produced experimental "flight platforms" by anchoring two converted merchantmen in the Atlantic, the *Westfalen* and the *Schwabenland*. Both had been converted into seaplane tenders that effectively serviced the Dornier flying boats that shuttled back and forth between Germany and South American ports.

The prophecy that a full-scale "F. P. 1" would be built soon did seem eminently reasonable in 1931 or 1932, but it did not come to pass.

The large expenditure of capital required delayed the actual building of such a floating island too long; long-range aircraft were built that did not need a refuelling station in mid-ocean. The Flight Platform became obsolete before it was ever built.

THERE exists a parallel to this story in another field of travel which is completely in the future. This is the idea of the station in space, also conceived in the twenties, and advanced as a necessity with very good and sound theoretical reasons. The station in space, roughly a small artificial moon circling Earth much closer than the real moon, also was designed principally as a refuelling station for spaceships. It was stated that a spaceship leaving Earth would have exhausted most of its fuel supply when reaching an altitude of, say, three thousand miles. If the ship could then be met by a fuel depot, things would be much easier all around.

Not only did this sound reasonable; it was, as we'll see later, perfectly correct in every respect. But the calculations which lent all the support to this idea worked with the fuels then known, usually with a mixture of hydrogen and oxygen. This mixture is the most powerful chemical fuel. Theoretically a hydrogen-ozone mixture is slightly more powerful, but nobody knows enough about ozone to talk about it sensibly, and it is likely to be extremely dangerous.

But in the meantime atomic fission and the uranium reaction have been discovered. That reaction is, of course, immensely more powerful than any chemical fuel can be.

So far the real "uranium fuel" (U-235) has been extracted from ordinary uranium only in microscopic quantities. Nobody has the slightest idea of a way in which U-235 could

be used. But the conviction is strong that U-235 will be the spaceship fuel of the future.

Supposing that this is correct—supposing that in the near future somebody discovers a commercially applicable method of separating the lighter U-235 atoms from the heavier U-238 atoms, and that somebody else finds a way to use them for the propulsion of rocket-like machinery—what, then, about the station in space? Will it be as obsolete as “F. P. 1”? Will it be built if there are atomic-powered spaceships that do not really need it?

The answer is still “Yes.”

The station in space will be built at any event and will be very useful, even if no spaceship setting out for or returning from long voyages will ever need it.

But first it is necessary to explain the theory of the outward station as quickly as it can be done. The idea was seriously advanced for the first time—some others had toyed with it at earlier dates—by Professor Hermann Oberth in 1923. It was developed by two Austrians, Count Guido von Pirquet and Captain Potocnik, who wrote under the pen name of Hermann Noordung. Both worked separately, with different ideas. The ideas of both are interesting.

The first question is, of course, how such a station could be maintained and why it would not fall down sooner or later. The answer to that is really a problem in ballistics. If a gun is fired perfectly horizontally the projectile describes two different motions at once. It travels horizontally with the speed with which it left the muzzle of the gun—neglecting air resistance—and it falls vertically because of gravity. Both motions together produced the well-known curved trajectory of a projectile.

A higher muzzle velocity will produce a longer range, obviously, since the shell can then travel farther before being dragged down. But when the range gets very long another factor enters into the picture. So far we have made the unspoken assumption that the surface of the earth is a plane. We know, however, that it is really spherical. And a sphere curves downward in all directions from any point.

It is clear that if only the velocity of the bullet is high enough, there will be a point where the downward curve of the spherical earth and the downward curve of the trajectory are equal. Then the bullet would

fall and fall and fall—and never reach the surface.

Mathematicians have invented a special name for the velocity at which this phenomenon is bound to occur. They call it the *circular velocity*, and it is, in the case of the Earth, almost precisely five miles per second. The next higher step is the so-called *parabolic velocity*, or *velocity of escape*, which, in the case of the Earth, is 7.1 miles per second. This is the velocity that definitely frees a body from the grip of Earth's attraction, the very minimum a spaceship would have to attain.

Even that is not yet quite enough for space travel. The velocity needed to throw the ship into the proper orbit for travel to another planet and several other fuel requirements have to be added.

It is obvious that a velocity of five miles per second will be attained sooner than a velocity of 7.1 miles plus. The station in space will be easier to realize than a flight to the moon. There is another complicating factor. The fuel burned in a rocket spends its energy not only in moving the rocket itself, but in moving all the other fuel that is still unburned. If you calculate the necessary amounts for really large rockets, say a spaceship able to carry two men and equipment, you get unbelievably large figures. Such a spaceship, taking off on a direct flight to the moon, would have to discharge forty tons of fuel during the first second. The amount required per second goes down rapidly, but since that amount is required for the first second the rocket motors have to be large enough to handle that quantity. If the spaceship were headed only for a station circling the Earth some six hundred miles above the surface, the amount of fuel needed for the first second of take-off would be only two tons. That simplifies the problem of rocket-motor design greatly. And for taking off from the station the fuel requirements per second are only around four hundred pounds.

These figures are correct for hydrogen and oxygen as spaceship fuel. They will be much smaller for atomic fuels. But, no matter what kind of fuel you assume, the relationship between the various figures must be the same. All of which goes to show that the functions of the station in space and of the platform in mid-ocean are not quite the same. The platform would only have permitted cutting down on the fuel tanks; the

station in space permits cutting down on the engine requirements. And that is the most obvious part of its usefulness.

Noordung and Von Pirquet, as I said, had different ideas about the station in space. Noordung placed the main emphasis on a possible feature of that station which has not yet been mentioned. If the station circles the Earth at the proper distance it will need precisely 24 hours for one revolution. It would seem to be fixed over one point of the surface, say, vertically above the Galapagos Islands—to simplify matters it must be a spot on the equator. The distance required to perform this feat is 35,900 kilometers, about 22,500 miles, from the surface. If the station circled at that distance its position would be fixed once and for all; it could easily be found.

But this is the only real advantage of such a great distance. The fuel expenditure and the engine requirements to reach it would be high, even though still far less than those for direct trips to other planets. On the other hand the engine requirements for taking off from the station would be even less than those mentioned a while ago.

Now in any combination of factors there is an optimum, a case where you get the biggest returns not for the least but for the easiest effort. There had to be such an optimal case for the distance of the station from the surface. Finding it was a question of calculating a series of possibilities, and Von Pirquet was just the man to indulge in

of the others just short of collision at the moments those other two stations pass that connection point of their orbits.

In that scheme the shuttle rockets from Earth would land on the IS, the passengers would be transferred to the OS via the TS, and the real spaceships would take off from the OS.

All this is at least a few scores of years in the future. But these are not flights of fancy—they are hard-headed mathematical predictions based on all known natural laws.

It is a matter of opinion whether such a station will be built in 1980, in 2000, or in 2020 A.D. It is a matter of opinion whether the methods of building it as worked out by Oberth* will be used then, or whether somebody may figure out a better way in the meantime. But there can be no doubt that a great number of people with "pull" of all kinds will clamor for berths on that station. Every scientist will want to work there for some time at least, whether he is an ardent supporter of space flights or doesn't give two hoots about the planets.

That station affords opportunities for scientific research that never existed anywhere else. It moves in a vacuum that is emptier than any we can create in the laboratory. And even if by then the better laboratory vacua should be just as empty, they will be much smaller.

The absence of air alone is worth any amount of trouble—but something else is

	Altitude above sea level	Time of one revolution	Table of orbits of Inner, Transit, and Outer Stations, showing intersections.
IS	480 miles	100 minutes	
TS	480—3125 miles	150 minutes	
OS	3125 miles	200 minutes	

such a mathematical spree. His final result is not a station—but three stations!

He has an Inner Station (IS) which madly races around the planet just outside the atmosphere, and an Outer Station (OS) which proceeds at a slightly more leisurely pace at a greater distance, connected by a Transit Station (TS) which travels in an elliptical orbit, touching the orbits of both

absent. Not gravity itself, strictly speaking, but the manifestations of gravity; the station moves around the planet in so-called "free fall," which means that gravity, while present, does not show itself.

Those interested in the absence of air will be the astronomers and, to a certain extent,

* He wanted to throw a space ship into the orbit and build the station around it.

the physicists. Those interested in the absence of the manifestations of gravity will be everybody.

Try to imagine what a radio engineer would give to be able to learn just how electric waves behave in a large vacuum. The radio experts have a fair idea of what they will do, but they'll want to test it. Try to imagine all the experiments a physicist will think up that require either a large vacuum or the peculiar gravitational manifestations (or lack thereof). Certainly biologists will drag amoebas and ciliate balls, frog eggs and pregnant rabbits along. They'll just have to know how large an amoeba would grow without splitting, how ciliate balls would hold together, how frog eggs will develop, and what would happen to a pregnant rabbit if the radiations of the sun impinge upon it without the shield of our atmosphere—which is almost opaque to any but visible rays.

Physicists will be interested in these and all other available rays. And chemists will go over all the chemical reactions known to them, starting out with the very simplest of schoolroom experiments. As far as we know gravity has nothing to do with chemical reactions—but if it *should* wield an influence we'd never know about it, simply because we cannot shut it off. The station will answer that question. If it settles it once and for all by yielding the same results obtained at home, fine. If not, whole chains of new possibilities will appear.

The experiments devised to test the Einstein theory of relativity, which proved inconclusive on earth, can be repeated there with a very good chance for success—and they will probably explode that theory.

But those that will really be happy are, of course, the astronomers. On earth they spend half their time wailing that atmospheric conditions are poor; the air has a habit of getting restless just at the crucial moment. That goes for direct observation as well as for photographic surveys—not to mention the howls of the spectrographers. While the spaceship engineers will show a marked preference for the Pirquet-type station, and while all the others will be content with that arrangement, the astronomers are likely to clamor for the Noordung station. To them it would combine the advantages of the station in space with the advantages of a fixed observatory on earth.

There is another feature the astronomers will like. Things apparently do not weigh anything; they will need no counterweights for their telescopes. Furthermore, very long telescopes have certain advantages—but on earth they also have disadvantages, due to weight. Out in space only the advantages will be left.

And there is only one reason for not building a telescope that magnifies a hundred thousand times—you could not use it in an atmosphere. That trouble is absent up there. The favorite question of whether there is life in certain craters on the moon or on the plains of Mars will be settled from the station, even before a spaceship ever actually gets to the surface of another planet.

All of which means that the station in space will be built under any circumstances, no matter what the technological development of the future will be like. The opportunities are far too important to be missed.

THE END

NEW DAY ON AURORA

(Continued from page 55)

the bed, scarcely feeling the pain that lanced through him at the abrupt motion.

Yes. He should have been revived by this time. Nara, bring the white-haired one.

And then, after a tremulous eternity, one of the green-skinned ones was coming back through the soft, hazy light with another remembered figure, and the calm, white-bearded face was smiling down at him with the old quiet affection.

"Father . . ."

Lax and Nara strolled once more to the

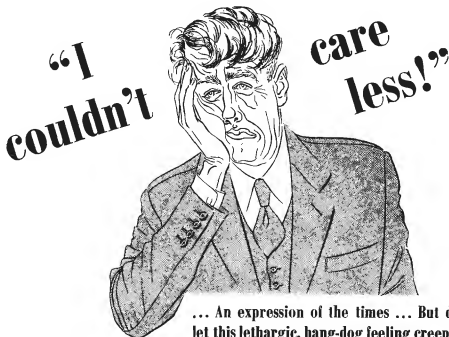
portal, overlooking the glowing, pastel city. Stars were coming out, one by one, in the violet-black of the sky.

Nara flexed his arms and breathed deeply of the night air. *Aurora*, he thought affectionately. *Aurora* did well in naming our world after the dawn-goddess of his race. Tomorrow—

—Is truly a new day, came Lex's soft thought, complementing his own.

And then for a long while they were silent.

THE END



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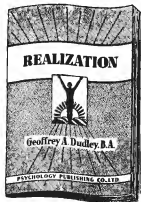
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